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ABSTRACT

Clear communication with parents about educational reform issues and the implementation of standards is essential. This publication presents ideas for state leaders on how better to inform parents about statewide assessments and how to report the results of these assessments to parents so that the results are more meaningful. The first section provides the perspectives of a parent and a policymaker when confronted with a new statewide test for the first time. The second section makes five strategic and four content recommendations and gives examples of how to make parents more aware of new tests, their purposes, and the changes they may bring. Section 3 gives some ideas on how to report testing results to parents. In the fourth section, five organizations that are committed to better communication with parents are described. Their structures, the coalitions they have built, and the products they produce to communicate with parents are described. Section 5 contains suggestions from the states with the best success in communicating with parents. This "Idea Book" also contains a series of "Close-ups" that provide stories from states on a variety of issues related to statewide testing, including reporting scores, evaluating communication tools, helping teachers with communication, and negotiating with the test provider. The appendixes contain some annotated score reports, a set of resources to assist states in communicating with parents, and acknowledgments. (SLD)

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ED 426 117

# Talking About Tests

*An Idea Book for State Leaders*

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Lessons from the States

The National Education Goals Panel

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## Is This Idea Book for You?

**It is if you are:**

- Implementing a new state test and ready to communicate about the test and the underlying standards with parents in your state so that they better understand and support these school improvement efforts.
- Looking for better ways of communicating your messages about standards and testing, whether or not you are implementing a new test.
- Interested in creating reports of individual student test results that are more meaningful to parents.
- Eager to help your state build the capacity to communicate with parents about the importance of higher standards and the new tests.

# How to Use This Idea Book

This publication presents ideas for state leaders on how to better inform parents about the issues surrounding changes in statewide assessments and how to better report the results of those assessments to parents so that they are more meaningful.

- Turn to the tab labeled **Section I** to learn more about the experiences of a parent and a policymaker when confronted with a new statewide test for the first time. Build your understanding of why it is so important that states do a better job of communicating with parents about the issues surrounding the state test.
- Go to the tab labeled **Section II** for recommendations and examples on how to make parents more aware of new tests, their purposes, and all the changes they may bring.
- Turn to the tab labeled **Section III** for some ideas on how to better report testing results to parents so that they are more meaningful.
- Go to the tab labeled **Section IV** for a description of five organizations that are committed to better communication with parents. Learn about their structure, the coalitions they have built, and the type of products they produce to communicate to parents about the state tests.
- Turn to the tab labeled **Section V** to find out suggestions from the states with the best success communicating with parents.
- Go to the **Appendices** for a look at some annotated score reports and a set of resources to assist you in improving communication with parents.

This Idea Book also presents a series of **Close-ups** that provide stories from states on a variety of issues concerning statewide testing, including:

- Reporting test scores using the media;
- Evaluating communication tools;
- Helping teachers to engage parents effectively; and
- Negotiating with the test provider.

For more information, see the Table of Contents, which starts on page vii.



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# Talking About Tests

*An Idea Book for State Leaders*

Lessons from the States

The National Education Goals Panel

## National Education Goals Panel

The National Education Goals Panel (NEGP) is a unique bipartisan and intergovernmental body of federal and state officials created in July 1990 to assess and report state and national progress toward achieving the National Education Goals. In 1994, the Goals Panel became a fully independent federal agency charged with monitoring and speeding progress toward the eight National Education Goals. Under the legislation, the Panel is charged with a variety of responsibilities to support systemwide reform, including:

- Reporting on national and state progress toward the Goals over a 10-year period;
- Working to establish a system of high academic standards and assessments;
- Identifying actions for federal, state, and local governments to take; and
- Building a nationwide, bipartisan consensus to achieve the Goals.

Panel members include eight Governors, four members of Congress, four state legislators, and two members appointed by the President.

Additional copies of this report are available at no charge from:

**National Education Goals Panel**
**1255 22nd Street, NW, Suite 502**
**Washington, DC 20037**
**Phone: 202/724-0015**
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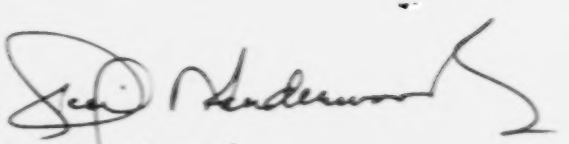
# Foreword

Over the last decade we have seen great strides in education. Governors, state and district leaders, and federal policymakers across the country are embracing the idea of setting high standards and expectations for what our children should know and be able to do. More and more states are aligning these high expectations to their assessment systems. But none of these efforts will amount to much unless they are understood and, in turn, supported by parents. By making parents more familiar with standards and assessments—in some cases, even by making parents aware that these tools exist—we can build a broader base of support for school improvement.

Clear communication is key. This Idea Book shows how states can communicate more effectively with parents, whether the subject is the need for higher standards or the results of state tests. The recommendations and examples in this book reflect in large part the work of the National Education Goals Panel's Advisory Group on Reporting Assessment Results to Parents. Nearly all the group's members work on the front lines of standards and assessments reform; many are engaged day-to-day in helping parents make sense of their states' expectations and monitor their children's progress in meeting them.

It is our challenge as state leaders to strive for better communication with parents. We hope this report will assist you in meeting this challenge.

Sincerely,



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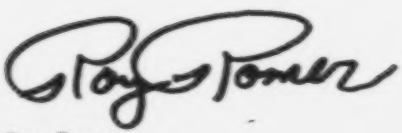
Chair (1998), National Education Goals Panel,
and Governor of West Virginia



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Member, National Education Goals Panel,
and Governor of Colorado

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Governor of Michigan

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Ronald Cowell
State Representative, Pennsylvania

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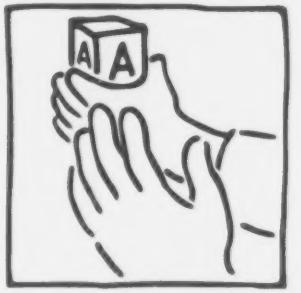
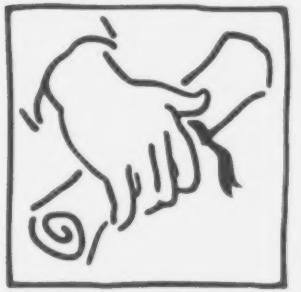
State Representative, Illinois

Douglas R. Jones
State Representative, Idaho

## The National Education Goals

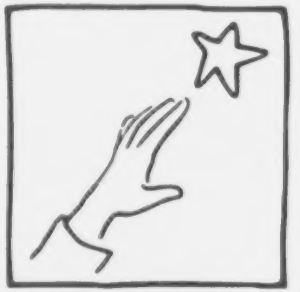
*Goal 1: Ready to Learn*
*By the year 2000, all children in America will start school ready to learn.*



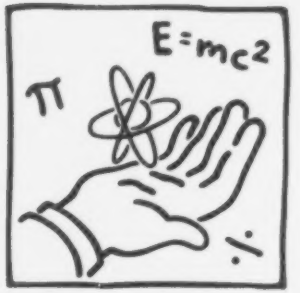
*Goal 2: School Completion*
*By the year 2000, the high school graduation rate will increase to at least 90 percent.*

*Goal 3: Student Achievement and Citizenship*
*By the year 2000, all students will leave grades 4, 8, and 12 having demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter including English, mathematics, science, foreign languages, civics and government, economics, arts, history, and geography, and every school in America will ensure that all students learn to use their minds well, so they may be prepared for responsible citizenship, further learning, and productive employment in our Nation's modern economy.*



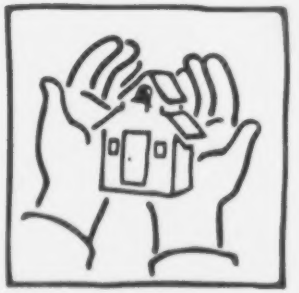
*Goal 4: Teacher Education and Professional Development*
*By the year 2000, the Nation's teaching force will have access to programs for the continued improvement of their professional skills and the opportunity to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to instruct and prepare all American students for the next century.*

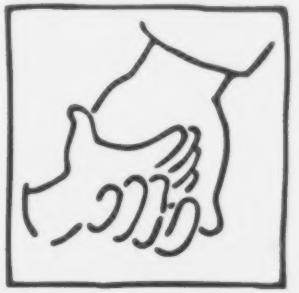
*Goal 5: Mathematics and Science*
*By the year 2000, United States students will be first in the world in mathematics and science achievement.*



*Goal 6: Adult Literacy and Lifelong Learning*
*By the year 2000, every adult American will be literate and will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.*

*Goal 7: Safe, Disciplined, and Alcohol- and Drug-free Schools*
*By the year 2000, every school in the United States will be free of drugs, violence, and the unauthorized presence of firearms and alcohol and will offer a disciplined environment conducive to learning.*





*Goal 8: Parental Participation*
*By the year 2000, every school will promote partnerships that will increase parental involvement and participation in promoting the social, emotional, and academic growth of children.*

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# Executive Summary

Standards for what students should know and be able to do in the basic subject areas are being developed or revised throughout the country. Most states are attempting to align their tests to these standards so that people know the extent to which standards are being met. Public reporting of this achievement information has become a central aspect of most states' accountability systems.

Americans are on board with these efforts. They are convinced that public schools are not expecting enough from their students, and as a result, there is broad support for proposals to set clearer and higher academic standards. Seven out of 10 Americans believe that these standards should be measured by tests. But more often than not, when it comes to understanding how these improvement efforts will affect their children and their schools, most parents have been left in the dark. A recent Public Agenda report, *Reality Check*, found that many parents "appear to lack a solid grasp of their schools' academic goals," as well as the "information essential to properly evaluate how well their children and schools are doing."

Clear communication with parents about these issues is critical. If parents are well informed and made a part of the improvement efforts from the beginning, they are more likely to be the catalyst needed for change—they are more likely to support their school's goals and demand the instructional changes necessary to meet those goals. To address these issues, state leaders should start asking themselves:

- Do parents understand why the state is moving toward higher standards?
- Do parents know what the standards are?
- Do parents understand the goals of the tests and what information the tests are designed (and not designed) to yield?

**To simplify the complicated messages about the need for higher standards and the new tests designed to measure the standards, the Goals Panel recommends the following:**

**Strategic Recommendations:**

- **Recommendation 1:** Address parents' concerns up front (page 7);
- **Recommendation 2:** Inform parents why the state is making these changes (page 7);
- **Recommendation 3:** Help parents to understand why scores may be low in the beginning and what will be done to improve scores over time (page 9);
- **Recommendation 4:** Place the new tests in perspective: don't overstate the importance of the new tests and don't overstate the failings of the more traditional tests (page 11);
- **Recommendation 5:** Answer questions thoughtfully and honestly (page 13).

**Content Recommendations:**

- **Recommendation 6:** Provide examples of what students need to know and be able to do (and let parents know how they can obtain complete descriptions) (page 16);
- **Recommendation 7:** Provide examples of test questions and examples of student work (those that meet the standard, those that do not meet the standard, and explanations as to why) (page 18);
- **Recommendation 8:** Use clear and concise language to define technical terms; avoid jargon (page 21);
- **Recommendation 9:** Provide tips for parents—suggestions they can use to encourage their children to develop their skills and knowledge and improve their academic performance (page 21).

- Do parents know what types of test questions will be on the assessment that is linked to the standards? Do they recognize good (and not-so-good) student performance on these questions?
- Do parents understand that the scores might be lower than those on the previous tests? Do they understand why?
- Do parents understand what to do with the results once they receive them?

It may not be necessary to provide all of the different types of information listed above. Determining what is best for the parents in your state will depend on the type of assessment system your state uses—it's not a one-size-fits-all. But the best combination will also be



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determined by *listening* to the parents in your state—through the use of surveys, focus groups, or face-to-face communication.

*Simplifying the message*
How can the complicated messages about the need for higher standards and new tests designed to measure the standards be simplified? The Goals Panel believes that states need to simplify these messages for parents by providing both background and context (strategic recommendations) and clarification (content recommendations). The strategic recommendations listed on the previous page will assist states in determining what information parents will want to better understand the issues surrounding the state tests and how that information should be presented; the content recommendations will assist states in thinking about how to make that information clear through the use of examples (e.g., examples of standards, test items, and student responses).

*Making test results more meaningful*
Once a student has taken the test, parents want to know the results. Most states provide this information through an individual student report.

Too often, however, individual student score reports are not very clear. In some cases, these reports provide too little information. Parents may have a hard time determining their child's performance with just a percentile rank, a percentage of questions answered correctly, or a term describing a level of achievement, if there is no description of what these numbers or words mean. In other cases, these reports provide too much detail and leave parents uninformed as to how their child performed. Translating an individual child's performance on a state test requires a balance between providing too little information and too much information.

**To create a balance between providing too little information and too much information on individual score reports, the Goals Panel recommends that states answer the following four questions:**

- **Question I:** How did my child do?
- **Question II:** What types of skills or knowledge does my child's performance reflect?
- **Question III:** How did my child perform in comparison to other students in the school, district, state, and—if comparable data are available—the nation?
- **Question IV:** What can I do to help my child improve?

Determining how best to answer these questions and design a score report that clearly and helpfully communicates the test performance requires listening to those who would be most interested in this information. It is helpful to recognize that there is a link between *informing* parents and *reporting* to parents. For parents to understand test scores, they want answers to a host of questions, including: Why did my child take this test? What are the standards? What did this test look like? What does it mean to "meet the standard"? Essentially, parents want states to provide the information consistent with the nine recommendations listed on the previous page.

**States with the best success communicating with parents suggest the following:**

- Listen to the parents in your community.
- Use clear and concrete language.
- Take the time to plan.
- Ensure a consistent message.
- Coordinate with others.
- Realize that improving your communication efforts will take resources.
- Recognize that moving toward a standards-based system takes political will.

The purpose of this Idea Book is to help you more clearly *inform* parents about state improvements in testing and the underlying academic expectations and, more clearly—and more meaningfully—*report* the results of those tests to parents.

# Talking About Tests: An Idea Book for State Leaders

## A policymaker's perspective...

As the Governor of Colorado, I often take a set of trips around the state which I call "Dome on the Range." The trip I took to Greeley, Colorado, in November 1997 was especially revealing.

Colorado had just released the results of a new standards-based assessment of 4th grade reading and writing. The tests showed that only a little more than half of our 4th graders were proficient or better in reading; less than a third could meet the standard in writing. The results upset many Coloradans, particularly in Greeley, where few schools had performed to the state average; this came as a shock because parents were used to reports that their students were "above the average."

As this particular meeting of parents and teachers progressed, I heard many frustrations. But those frustrations were not due to the state's move to a standards-based system; virtually all supported the idea of establishing benchmarks for what students should know and be able to do and evaluating their performance on that basis. Nor was it the results themselves that proved troubling; most of the parents and teachers with whom I spoke recognized—better than I did—the challenges their children faced.

Instead, I found that my audience was frustrated with the lack of information about what their child's test scores meant. They wanted more than just an individual score. Parents wanted examples of test items, sample student responses, and suggestions as to how to help their children succeed. The parents believed this information would make the results of the test meaningful and provide them with what they need to help their child achieve to higher levels.

Parents at that meeting underscored for me that standards and assessments will amount to very little unless they can understand and interpret them.

*Summary of comments of Governor Roy Romer, Spring 1998*

## A parent's perspective...

Much of my anxiety as a parent reflected the fact that this new test came about with little advance warning. For many years, the state had used the same test, a traditional multiple-choice, basic-skills test in reading, mathematics, science, and social studies. Our district had done very well in previous years; reading scores were the third highest in the state.

This year though, the state moved to implement higher standards for student performance, just as other states across the country were doing. As part of that effort, the state was looking to change its testing program to reflect these higher standards for students. The subject area the state decided to change first was mathematics. Once a test was chosen, a notice was sent home indicating that all students would be taking a new 90-minute test the following month.

The notice used the word "performance test" but did not explain what was meant by the term. No explanation was given as to how this test was going to be different from the test used in prior years. There was no indication of the types of questions my child would be asked, what would be considered "good" work, or how these questions would be scored. In fact, I didn't even know what my child was expected to know in math—or where I could go to find out.

Once I received my child's individual score, I had even more questions. For starters, I didn't know what the report was telling me. For all the numbers and words on the one-page report, not one word indicated whether my daughter had actually done "okay." The report did use the term "proficient" but nowhere was that term defined. From what I could tell, it did not look as though she had done very well; I was confused by that and concerned, because she had done so well in previous years. I wasn't prepared for a lower score. And I didn't understand how the results of this test would be used with other district and classroom testing information. In addition, comparisons were not provided, nor was I told where I could go for information on how well other districts and schools were doing across the state. I didn't know what I could do to help my daughter improve—I wanted additional information so that I could better understand how to help her move to a higher level of achievement.

*Adapted from an article that appeared in* Education Week *on May 14, 1997, by Robert Rothman.*

## Introduction

The National Education Goals Panel has created this Idea Book for two reasons:

1. So that more parents will have their questions answered and their concerns allayed about a new testing program. They will better understand their child's results, and know what to do with these results;

2. To provide policymakers with strategies to more effectively communicate with parents so that they have the information and understanding they want about the new testing program.

Standards for what students should know and be able to do in the basic subject areas are being developed or revised throughout the country. Most states are attempting to align their tests to these standards so that people know the extent to which standards are being met. Public reporting of this achievement information has become a central aspect of most states' accountability systems.

Americans are on board with these efforts. They are convinced that public schools are not expecting enough from their students, and as a result, there is broad support for proposals to set clearer and higher academic standards.[1] Seven out of 10 Americans believe that these standards should be measured by tests.[2] But more often than not, when it comes to understanding how these improvement efforts will affect their children and their schools, most parents have been left in the dark.[3] A recent Public Agenda report, *Reality Check*, found that many parents "appear to lack a solid grasp of their schools' academic goals," as well as the "information essential to properly evaluate how well their children and schools are doing."[4] As the accounts on the previous page highlight, parents have concerns, they are confused, they want information, and they want answers.

[1] This report follows the National Parent-Teacher Association definition of "parent"—the adults who play an important role in a child's family life since other adults—grandparents, aunts, uncles, step-parents, and guardians—may carry the primary responsibility for a child's education, development, and well-being.



Clear communication with parents about these issues is critical because parents are important for the acceptance and success of any improvement effort. If parents are well informed and made a part of the improvement effort from the beginning, they are more likely to be the catalyst needed for change—they are more likely to support their school's goals and to demand the instructional changes necessary to meet those goals.

To address these issues, state leaders should start asking themselves:

- Do parents understand why the state is moving toward higher standards?
- Do parents know what the standards are?
- Do parents understand the goals of the tests and what information the tests are designed (and not designed) to yield?
- Do parents know what types of test questions will be on the assessment that is linked to the standards? Do they recognize good (and not-so-good) student performance on these questions?
- Do parents understand that the scores might be lower than those on the previous tests? Do they understand why?
- Do parents understand what to do with the results once they receive them?

### Report design and audience

This report is designed to help state leaders begin to answer critical questions about their assessment systems. **Section II** examines how states can more effectively *inform* parents so that they become more aware of and better understand state efforts to improve standards and create new assessments. **Section III** examines how states can more effectively and meaningfully *report* individual results of statewide student assessments to parents. **Section IV** highlights state agencies and other organizations that are performing these functions well.

The intended audience for this report is state policymakers who shape the testing program and report the results—governors, state legislators, chief state school officers and their testing staff, and state boards of education. It is also addressed to those outside govern-

ment—business leaders and others—who have a stake in building awareness and understanding about the school improvement efforts of individual states.

**The state examples**

The examples presented in **Sections II** and **III** show how some states, through their communication pieces targeted toward parents, have:

- **built public support** for high standards and more rigorous tests;
- **communicated the standards** and **good performance**;
- **provided assistance** to parents so that achievement can improve; and
- **reported** state **test results** in a more **meaningful** way.

These examples are based on the advice of state, local, and federal officials (listed in Appendix C), many of whom are seeking better ways to help parents understand their children's test results and the standards that underlie the state's academic expectations. These officials reviewed a comprehensive set of existing materials sent from the offices of the governors and chief state school officers. Examples in this report were chosen not to endorse states or to offer perfect illustrations but rather to highlight the "real-world" practices currently in use. As states prepare their own documents, they must work hard to develop materials that avoid jargon and are understandable to the lay reader.

**State-to-district communication**

We recognize that states do not communicate alone—that communication about the issues surrounding state assessments needs to happen in collaboration with local leaders. That is why this report includes some strategies for how states can strengthen their relationship with districts to assist them in building public support and understanding for school improvement efforts aimed at raising standards, making tests tougher, and increasing accountability (see **Close-up 1**).



CLOSE-UP 1:

## Strategies to help districts build public support

States and school districts across the country have learned that even the best education reform plans fail without significant levels of public support. As states and districts adopt rigorous academic standards, assessments, and accountability measures, a strategic communications plan should be in place. A communications plan not only places everyone—stakeholders, policymakers, and district-level staff—on the same page; it also serves as a blueprint for building public support for quality education throughout the state.

The key to improved communications—states to districts and districts to states—is for states to share the communications plan with districts, including superintendents, communications directors, assessment directors, teacher unions and leadership, and parent and community organizations. States need to let districts know that a plan is in place and that there is a role for them to play in the journey to higher standards, better assessments, and increased accountability.

States can help districts to achieve these goals by providing them with a variety of tools. These tools can foster consistent and clear communication with parents about standards and assessments, as well as help encourage more meaningful conversations between school and home. They are intended to perform a variety of functions:

- Demonstrating to districts that the commitment to improved communications is a priority by dedicating time, resources, and expert personnel to communicating standards and results.
- Developing clear and concise messages with no educational jargon and providing these messages in a series of fact sheets for districts and local schools to discuss and distribute to parents, teachers, and other stakeholders on such topics as
  - The need for developing state-level standards and assessments;
  - How-to's for improving student performance results;
  - Test-taking tips for students and parents;
  - Suggested guides for parent-teacher conferences; and
  - Clearly stated and illustrated standards and examples of test questions.
- Encouraging assessment and communications staffs (state and districts) to work together to improve communications to students, parents, and teachers.
- Involving district communications directors in developing and evaluating communications tools.

CLOSE-UP 1:

## Strategies to help districts build public support (continued)

These tools might include all or a combination of the following:

- "Questions and Answers" on standards, assessments, and accountability
- A list of questions for parents to ask their child's teacher to help them work toward better results
- Tips for teachers on how to provide information to parents
- Web site access for up-to-the-minute changes
- A list of state and national resource guides on standards and assessments
- Remarks and speeches from key individuals (the Chief State School Officer, the Governor, etc.)
- A contact list and hotline numbers
- A calendar of key state dates such as:
  - Test dates
  - Test release dates
  - Open public meetings
- A glossary of frequently used terms

Building public support also means communicating results honestly, clearly, and in a timely manner. Recognizing that the turnaround time from the state offices to the districts is short, states can provide districts with a number of tools to assist districts in preparing, analyzing, and reporting their results.



CLOSE-UP 1:

The Ohio Department of Education recently released a toolkit, *Putting the Pieces Together: A Communications Toolkit for the Local Report Card*, to help districts design and implement their communications regarding local report cards. The toolkit contains a number of materials including:

- Fact sheets
- Local report card prototypes
- Frequently asked questions
- Questions to consider (questions that districts are likely to hear from the community)
- Talking points
- Suggestions on how to get parents and families more involved in school improvement efforts
- A technical definitions manual (providing the background information on how each data element is calculated)

*For more information on Ohio's toolkit, contact the Ohio Department of Education at 614/466-3641, or visit their web site at www.ode.ohio.gov.*

## SECTION II:
## Simplifying the Message

It's important to not underestimate the confusion about new tests designed to meet higher standards. Parents come to the table with many questions and a lot of anxieties. Simplifying these complicated issues is not always easy; in fact, creating a document that parents would actually *want* to read is difficult.

How can these complicated messages be simplified? How can states explain the purpose of new tests and the underlying standards? The Goals Panel believes that states need to simplify these messages for parents by providing both background and context (strategic recommendations) and clarification (content recommendations). The strategic recommendations listed below will assist states in determining what information parents want and how that information should be presented. The content recommendations will assist states in thinking about how to make that information clear through the use of examples (e.g., examples of standards, test items, and student responses).

**Some simple ways to be simple:**

- include graphics and pictures;
- use large print;
- use jargon sparingly and define what you mean;
- aim to an 8th-grade reading level;
- keep it short.

*Strategic recommendations:*

- **Recommendation 1**: Address parents' concerns up front;
- **Recommendation 2**: Inform parents why the state is making these changes;
- **Recommendation 3**: Help parents to understand why scores may be low in the beginning and what will be done to improve scores over time;
- **Recommendation 4**: Place the new tests in perspective: don't overstate the failings of the more traditional tests and don't overstate the importance of the new tests;
- **Recommendation 5**: Answer questions thoughtfully and honestly, such as:
  - What are the standards?
  - Who set the standards?
  - What are the consequences of the assessment?
  - How are the results of the assessment going to be used?
  - What if my child has special needs?
  - When is the assessment scheduled? How much class time will it take?
  - Where can I get more information?

*Content recommendations:*

- **Recommendation 6**: Provide examples of what students need to know and be able to do (and let parents know how they can obtain complete descriptions);
- **Recommendation 7**: Provide examples of test questions and examples of student work (those that meet the standard, those that do not meet the standard, and explanations as to why);
- **Recommendation 8**: Use clear and concise language to define technical terms; avoid jargon;
- **Recommendation 9**: Provide tips for parents—suggestions they can use to encourage their children to develop their skills and knowledge and improve their academic performance.

It is probably not necessary to provide all of the different types of information listed above. Determining the best combination of information for the parents in your state will depend on the type of assessment system in your state—it's not a one-size-fits-all. But the best combination of information will also be determined by *listening* to the parents in your state—through the use of surveys, focus groups, or face-to-face communication.

Georgia is an example of a state that listened. In January 1996, the Georgia Department of Education released its first annual report card. Titled *The Georgia Public Education Report Card*, it provided data on Georgia's 180 school systems and 1,800 schools for the 1994-95 school year. Although the public received the report card enthusiastically, concerns soon became apparent. In response to those concerns, and realizing that input from parents would be

## CLOSE-UP II:

## Reporting to parents—Lessons from Georgia

In January 1996, the Georgia Department of Education released its first annual report card and provided it to all its school systems and schools for the 1994-95 school year.

Although the public received the report card data enthusiastically, concerns soon became apparent. Comments from parents suggested that the amount of data on schools was overwhelming for the general public and that ways for parents to use the data were unclear. Instead, parents indicated that they preferred information about schools in a more user-friendly format. The department therefore decided to produce the report card in two formats for the 1995-96 school year. One format would be an expanded version of comprehensive data (with accompanying definitions for educators); the second would be designed exclusively for parents.

Input from parents was critical to creating a document to meet their needs. A series of six focus group meetings with parents was held throughout the state. Participants were asked to keep in mind three overriding questions throughout the focus group discussion: 1) Are these the data parents want and need about their child's school? 2) Are the data presented in an understandable format? 3) What other data elements not currently collected do parents want included on a report card specifically designed for them?

Information gained from the focus groups with parents included the following:

- Overall, parents wanted a concise, easy-to-read document that provided general data about a school. Such a document should encourage parents to feel more comfortable in the school, to stimulate questions about the programs in the school, and to become more actively involved in their child's education.
- Parents wanted a simple, one-page document reporting only the data deemed most important. The majority of parents would not read a comprehensive document.
- Parents wanted the document to be titled "Report Card for Parents" to encourage all parents to become more knowledgeable about their child's school.
- Parents overwhelming agreed that data presented in both graphics and text formats would be more easily understood.
- Parents wanted all state-mandated test information reported. They were particularly interested in data showing comparisons with other schools in their system, the state, and the nation. Parents generally did not understand the differences between norm-referenced and criterion-referenced tests. They wanted the text to include an explanation of the purpose of the tests and of the scoring.

The Georgia Department of Education took the results of the focus groups and developed the *Report Card for Parents* beginning with the 1995-96 school year. The department produced and distributed 200 copies of the report card to each of the state's 1,800 schools. The document was produced on legal-size paper folded in half, making it easy to duplicate. Schools were encouraged to produce additional copies of the report card as needed and to send it to parents. The report card was also produced in an electronic format. Both versions of the report card—the more comprehensive data report and the *Report Card for Parents*—were included on a CD-ROM and on the department's web page at www.doe.k12.ga.us. Reactions to both versions have been extremely positive and resulted in the department continuing to develop and produce two formats of *The Georgia Public Education Report Card*.

*For more information, contact the Georgia Department of Education at 404/656-2800 or visit their web site at www.doe.k12.ga.us.*

critical to meet parents' needs, the department conducted a series of focus group meetings.

What Georgia learned about school report cards also applies to the individual student report (which is further discussed in **Section III**): there are inconsistencies in what parents consider important and in what they want. By taking the time to listen, Georgia was able to recognize and better understand what parents were asking for—to have comparative information, definitions, graphs, and text, all on a simple, one-page document—and acknowledge that these conflicting demands present challenges in creating reports that meet parents' expectations.

For details on the inconsistencies Georgia found and the questions asked, see **Close-up II**.

## Strategic recommendations

*Recommendation 1: Address parents' concerns up front*
States should be sensitive to issues that in some states have provoked anxiety among parents—especially what the test covers and how the results will be used. In many cases, these concerns may go beyond the "most commonly asked questions" (see Recommendation 3). Addressing these issues early before they actually become "concerns" is critical to avoiding problems later, such as once the test has been developed or administration has begun. Some concerns states may want to consider addressing up front include the following:

- Does the test cover the basics, such as spelling, grammar, punctuation, and multiplication tables?
- Do the test questions have multiple correct answers?
- Are the scores subjective—do they reflect the judgments of the test scorers, rather than a child's abilities?
- Does the new assessment system test values and attitudes?
- Is the test culturally and/or racially biased?
- Could the test results be used to track children and invade family privacy?
- If a child does not pass the test, will he/she not be promoted to the next grade (or will he/she not be able to graduate)?

In Oregon's newsletter, *A School Assignment for All Oregonians: Transforming Oregon Schools to Prepare Students for the 21st Century*, information is provided to parents about "Oregon's school transformation" (see Example 1).

*Recommendation 2: Inform parents why the state is making these changes*
One way to inform parents why the state is moving toward a system of higher standards and tougher tests is to provide hard facts. States need to show parents that the status quo is no longer good enough.

**Example 1**

**Q** **Will students learn the basics?**

**A** *Yes. Oregon has academic standards in six basic areas: English, mathematics, science, the social sciences (history, civics, geography and economics), the arts and second languages. At grade 3, for example, students will be expected to demonstrate they can read accurately. At grade 5, students will be expected to use correct spelling, grammar and punctuation and add, subtract, multiply and divide with fractions. Students will be expected to explain the powers of the three branches of U.S. government by grade 8. And they will be required to describe major developments in world history as sophomores. State tests and classroom assignments will evaluate whether students have mastered these and other fundamental areas.*

*For more information, contact the Oregon Department of Education at 503/378-3573 or visit their web site at www.ode.state.or.us.*

Scores from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), if your state participates, or recent polling or focus group data can provide that information. But numbers will not necessarily speak for themselves. States need to answer the question—how will these changes help my child?—by connecting the data to people's lives. States should be clear that current achievement levels are not sufficient to allow students to get a good job or succeed in college—higher achievement is necessary. The link between preparing children for the future and the higher standards and new tests needs to be explicit.

The example on the next page comes from the cover of the Philadelphia school district's pamphlet on the SAT-9 for parents. It underscores for parents the link between high expectations and better results and drives home the point that the assessment is important.

## Example 2

**THE SCHOOL DISTRICT OF PHILADELPHIA**
**BOARD OF EDUCATION**
21ST STREET S. OF THE PARKWAY
PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA 19103-1099

DAVID W. HORNBECK
SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOLS

October, 1997

Dear Parents,

This month you will start meeting with your children's teachers to talk about their progress in school. In addition to report cards and examples of classwork, standardized tests provide another indication of what students know and what they are able to do.

For the past two years, the School District of Philadelphia has given a new kind of standardized test called the Stanford-9 (SAT-9) to help determine the levels of reading, math and science skills of students in the District. The test is issued by Harcourt Brace Educational Measurement , one of the leading educational testing publishers in the world. Harcourt Brace is also responsible for marking the test and providing the District with student scores. Test results are available for every student who took the test. The District also has summarized results for each school and for the District as a whole.

As we shift to a standards-based education system, many facets of our curriculum, instruction, and assessment systems will change. The SAT-9 is one component of the School District of Philadelphia's new system for determining how our students are performing.

The SAT-9 was selected because of its unique characteristics. It reflects national standards in reading, math and science on which our standards are based. It examines higher order thinking skills like problem solving and requires students to do more than simply recall memorized facts. The SAT-9 often requires the student to write an answer. It presents tasks that closely resemble the kinds of activities that our students use in classrooms and that employers seek in the workplace.

The District goal is to have our children score at the "proficient" level on this test. This level indicates that a student is prepared to move to the next grade.

The SAT-9 test expects more from your children and holds them to a higher standard than other tests they have taken. Many of the questions on the test are "open ended" and the answers require critical thinking, problem solving and writing skills. Experience has shown us that when you expect more of children, they rise to the challenge and tend to fulfill your expectations.

These test results will allow you to identify your child's strengths and weaknesses. You can determine how your child performed on different types of questions and gain a better understanding of how you can support teachers' efforts to help your children succeed. In addition, the data can be used by school staff to help shape plans to improve curriculum and to design more effective instructional practice.

The test is given to children in grades 2, 3, 4, 7, 8, 9 and 11. We use grades 4, 8 and 11 as benchmark years to assess student performance in elementary, middle and high schools, respectively. Please note that grades 2 and 9 were tested only using open-ended questions.

Please feel free to ask questions about the test.

This pamphlet is provided to help you further understand the SAT-9 assessment system.

Sincerely,

David W. Hornbeck
Superintendent

*For more information, contact the Philadelphia School District's Office of Communications at 215/299-7850.*

Example 3 (below) provides another example of a state linking the need for higher standards and the new tests in preparing children for the future. It appears in the Massachusetts Coalition for Higher Standards *Starting Now* flyer.

An April 1998 editorial in the *Boston Globe* indicated that Mass Insight Education and Research Institute (the group that manages the Massachusetts Coalition for Higher Standards) "has shown imagination in pinpointing the kind of information most needed by students, teachers, parents, and others and has been resourceful in spreading the word."

**Example 3**

## Why State Standards and New Tests?

Massachusetts has many of the finest schools in the country. Overall, our students do very well on national tests, when compared with students from other states.

But even in Massachusetts, only one in three 4th-graders is proficient in **reading**, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, considered the most rigorous and reliable report card for the nation's schools. Only one in four of our 8th-graders is proficient in **math**. Four in ten 8th-graders are proficient in **science**. These scores are not good enough for today's world.

### We all can do better

Many people assume these challenges are isolated in our big cities and lower-income school districts. They are wrong. There is plenty of evidence that even our highest-performing schools can do better — and need to do better as they prepare their students to compete with children from all over the world.

Preparing students to achieve at higher levels in school is an enormous challenge for teachers, students and schools. It's also a public priority: A recent poll by Mass Insight shows that 82 percent of state residents agree that the state needs to set higher academic standards and develop more challenging tests for local schools. And 72 percent agree that "having academic standards and state tests beginning this spring will lead to better education."

### Improving instruction, boosting achievement

Our new, rigorous standards already are improving instruction in many classrooms across the commonwealth. They are making clear — to students, teachers and parents — the knowledge and skills that pupils must have in core academic subjects, whether they live in Boston, Greenfield or Concord. The new tests, in turn, will measure individual student achievement: Each student will know whether he or she meets the standard, exceeds it or falls below it.

The new tests will replace the MEAP exams that have been given every two years since 1986. Because the new state tests are based on our standards, they will present a more useful picture of school and student performance. And teachers and students will take the new standards and tests seriously because students will receive individual test scores and have a specific, measurable graduation requirement that is tied to the tests.

*For more information about the Massachusetts Coalition for Higher Standards, see* **Section IV**, *or contact the Coalition at 617/492-0580 or at insight@massinsight.com.*

*Recommendation 3: Help parents to understand why scores may be low in the beginning and what will be done to improve scores over time*

The experience of many states shows that initial scores on new state tests are likely to be low. All parents, especially those who are used to their child scoring in the 90th percentile or higher, will need to know to expect something lower. Parents need to know that the tests are tough. They need to know that lower scores are not, in and of themselves, bad—but that they represent a picture of achievement measured against higher standards. States need to explain that these tests provide information that will help teachers and principals to determine where a student is academically strong and where additional work and support are needed. Most important, states need to remind parents that these changes will take time to make their way into every classroom, while providing a realistic picture of how quickly these changes are being implemented. Parents need to be assured that, over time, these changes will make a positive difference in their child's education and that instruction will improve for all students.

The example on the next page, taken from the Washington State Partnership for Learning's brochure *Here's the Truth*, addresses this issue.

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# You Can't Make Sound Decisions in Life without Good Information.

## To Develop a Winning Strategy, You Need Accurate Data. You Need the Hard Truth about What You Do Well and What Needs to Change and Improve.

In 1997, over 1,100 elementary schools voluntarily stepped up to the plate and accepted the challenge of getting the hard truth about the performance of their students. They agreed to see how well their students measured up against a set of rigorous academic standards. These schools are leaders, and they share a commitment to doing what it takes to improve their instruction so their students can meet higher standards.

The standards include the skills and knowledge we all know students need to master to do well as they progress through school, such as reading various stories and materials, writing both creatively and persuasively, listening accurately, and knowing math functions and how and when to apply them.

The information comes back to schools in September in the form of scores from a new fourth grade test that measures the wide range of important skills and knowledge specified in the new standards. Schools administered the new test knowing that neither their students or teachers had time to adequately prepare or learn the new material. But the goal of this test wasn't to "pass" or "fail" students. Rather, it was to get an accurate picture of where the "gaps" exist.

The test scores give schools information that will help them figure out where the curriculum and instruction they are using today matches the standards and where it doesn't. Which skills and knowledge in the standards are students already learning well? Where is more attention needed? The scores provide baseline data that help schools focus their efforts, target their energies, and work more productively.

On a statewide basis, the scores from this first test are sobering. But they aren't an insurmountable problem. Like any effort to improve, the first and most important step to success is having good information to act on and a clear plan for what needs to be accomplished. All of us now have that information. So, rather than dwell on the numbers it's more productive to support schools as they act to improve those numbers. With the hard, focused work of teachers and students - as well as supporters in the community - schools will improve.

*For more information about the Partnership for Learning, see Section IV, or contact the Partnership at 206/625-9655 or visit their web site at www.partnership-wa.org.*

*Recommendation 4: Place the new tests in perspective: don't overstate the importance of the new tests and don't overstate the failings of the more traditional tests*

The differences between the more traditional tests and the new tests shouldn't be presented as a contest between "good" and "bad." Many parents continue to see educational value in more traditional tests—and they get confused and worried when told that the newer tests are simply better.

This doesn't mean that the new tests may not have clear advantages over more traditional tests: they may measure a broader range of important skills and knowledge, and they may also use more substantive ways to have students show what they know (e.g., written response and answer justification). But they may also have disadvantages: they take longer, they are more expensive, and they don't necessarily yield national comparisons.

One way to illustrate the differences between the more traditional tests and the new tests is through a chart that lists the differences. The following is from *Understanding the New 4th- and 7th-Grade Tests*, a publication of the Washington State Commission on Student Learning.

**Example 5**

## What's New About the New Test

**The chart below shows how the new test differs from the ones that children in Washington State have been taking for the last 20 years.**

| *Old State Test* | *New State Test* |
|---|---|
| ✔ *All multiple-choice questions* | ✔ *Multiple-choice, short answer, and extended response questions* |
| ✔ *Scored by machines* | ✔ *Scored by specially-trained experts* |
| ✔ *Student's score is compared with a selected group of other students who took the same test.* | ✔ *Student's level of knowledge on a subject is compared to what is considered mastery of the subject.* |
| ✔ *Measures some kinds of knowledge and skills very well, such as vocabulary and computation.* | ✔ *Measures vocabulary, computation, and subjects that can't be measured by computer-scored tests, such as writing and listening.* |

*For more information, contact the Washington Commission on Student Learning at 360/664-3155 or visit their web site at csl.wednet.edu*

Maryland provides similar information in a fact sheet from the Department of Education. *Fact Sheet 6* answers the following questions:

**Example 6**

*REVISED MARCH 1997*

**1. What is the Maryland School Performance Assessment Program (MSPAP)?**

MSPAP is an assessment or testing program with the primary purpose of providing information that can be used to improve instruction in schools. The MSPAP measures the performance of Maryland schools in three ways:

- how well students solve problems cooperatively and individually
- how well students apply what they have learned to real world problems
- how well students can relate and use knowledge from different subject areas

**2. How does the MSPAP differ from traditional achievement tests?**

- MSPAP is intended to measure school improvement, not individual student performance.
- MSPAP tasks include a series of related steps that draw on knowledge across content areas.
- MSPAP tasks are related to "real-life" situations.
- MSPAP tasks typically require students to write extensively; they are not multiple choice questions that can be answered by simple rote learning and memorization of facts.

For example, one 5th grade task asks the student to figure out if the school can raise $200 for a school banner in a 6-week time frame. Using a chart on aluminium can recycling and responding to a number of specific questions, the student figures out the conditions necessary to reach the fund-raising goal, then writes a brief feasibility statement to present to the student council.

*For more information, contact the Maryland State Department of Education at 410/767-0473.*

The Massachusetts Coalition for Higher Standards chose to provide information on the differences between their old test and their new test through the use of Q&A in their *Coalition Update* newsletter:

**Example 7**

**Q & A**

**Why should we expect the MCAS test to spur improvements in education when previous statewide standardized tests did not?**

Communities familiar with previous rounds of education reform often express doubt that the state standards and testing program will produce significant results. Many fear that MCAS scores will only serve to once again stigmatize their communities. The new program, however, is more comprehensive than previous reform efforts. Unlike previous tests, the MCAS tests:

- are rigorous and based on the skills needed in today's increasingly complex economy. Research and experience show that students respond to higher expectations.
- will provide more detailed results, which teachers and schools can use to improve their teaching and curriculum. Previous tests gave broad indications of school performance. The MCAS tests will give specific information on each student and each skill tested.
- contain accountability mechanisms, including a graduation requirement, that are making schools and students take notice and push harder for improvements.
- are based on a uniform set of state academic standards that every public school student is learning. Previous tests covered only about 50-60 percent of each local curriculum.

*For more information about the Coalition, see* **Section IV**, *or contact the Coalition at 617/492-0380 or at insight@massinsight.com.*



*Recommendation 5: Answer questions thoughtfully and honestly*
Almost all states use the Q&A format to provide answers to more commonly asked questions about their new testing programs. Examples differ among states but it is critical to select questions that are important to parents, and to frame the answers in clear and simple language. Educational jargon should be used sparingly, and terms should be well defined.

Questions may include:

- What are the standards?
- Who set the standards?
- What are the consequences of the assessment?
- How are the results of the assessment going to be used?
- What if my child has special needs?
- When is the assessment scheduled? How much class time will it take?
- Where can I get more information?

The example on the following page answers questions of this type and is reprinted from the Massachusetts Department of Education's *The New Massachusetts Test for Students*.

## Background

**What is the new statewide testing program?**
As mandated by the Education Reform Law of 1993, the new statewide testing program is designed to evaluate how well students are meeting the state's new learning standards in the curriculum frameworks. In 1998, students will be tested in English language arts, mathematics, and science and technology. A history and social science test will be added in 1999. A foreign languages test will be added later, in accordance with an amendment to the law.

## Participation

**Are all students required to take the new tests?**
Yes. All 4th, 8th and 10th grade students in Massachusetts' public schools will take the tests every spring. This includes students in vocational schools and charter schools.

## Content

**How much time will the tests take?**
The tests will be administered in 45 minute sessions. The math and science & technology tests take 3 sessions at grades 4 & 8, and 4 sessions at grade 10. The English language arts test, which is both a reading and writing test, will take 7 sessions. Schools will be given three weeks over which to conduct the tests, so schools can budget about 2 sessions per day, and allow time for make-up sessions. This amount of testing time is necessary because (1) the test includes open-ended questions which require significant time; (2) enough questions need to be asked to produce reliable student level reports; and (3) ample time is built into each session for all students to complete and check their work.

## Results

**Will fourth or eighth graders be denied promotion to the next grade if they do poorly on the tests?**
Beginning in May 1998, students in grades 4, 8, and 10 will be tested, and given individual scores. Promotion policies are local decisions. The statewide test should not be the only evaluation of a student's performance.

**What happens to tenth grade students who do not pass the tests?**
Beginning in the year 2001, students will be required to pass the 10th grade test to graduate. Students will have multiple opportunities to retake any part of the test they do not pass.

**Will any special services or programs be offered to students who score poorly on the tests?**
Support for students who score poorly on the tests will be a local responsibility. Schools will consider a range of approaches, from improving and supplementing instruction during the normal school day to providing opportunities for intense assistance after school, during the summer and other times.

**Will parents be informed of their children's results?**
Yes. Parents will receive their children's test scores.

**Will the state publish any of the test questions after the test results are returned?**
Yes. After each administration of the state test, many of the questions will be made available to the public. In the case of open-ended questions, sample questions and answers illustrating a full range of responses (from low to high performance) will also be made available.

**★ How do I find out more about the new learning standards, the curriculum frameworks, and the new tests?**
Every school and public library in the Commonwealth has copies of the learning standards and curriculum frameworks. In addition, you may visit the Department of Education's website at www.doe.mass.edu to review the curriculum frameworks and find out more about the new testing program. Or write or call the Department of Education at 350 Main St., Malden, MA 02148 (781-388-3300) and we will be happy to assist you.

*For more information, contact the Massachusetts Department of Education at 781/388-3300 or visit their web site at www.doe.mass.edu*

The following is reprinted from The Gwinnett County Public Schools' *A Parent's Guide to Student Achievement*.

## Example 9

As a parent, you want your child to succeed in school and you want to help in any way you can. That's the purpose of this brochure—to give you, parents, a clear understanding of what students are expected to learn in Gwinnett's schools, how that learning is measured, ways you can help your child, and how to get your questions answered.

Keep reading to learn how Gwinnett County Public Schools has combined a rigorous curriculum, exceptional teaching, and reliable testing to form a comprehensive instructional program that parents helped us create. Keep reading so you can be a fully informed member of your child's "teaching team."

Since our mission is "to pursue excellence in academic knowledge, skills, and behavior for each student resulting in measured improvement against local, national, and world class standards," you know that we are committed to your child's academic achievement. The following are some frequently asked questions regarding student achievement in Gwinnett.

**Why is the AKS, Gwinnett's curriculum, so special?**

The Academic Knowledge and Skills, AKS, was developed by teachers with input from over 5,000 parents. It reflects what parents and teachers feel is essential for students to learn in each subject area at each grade level. The AKS provides a hands-on curriculum, written and organized in a way that makes it easy for everyone to know what is being taught and learned in Gwinnett's classrooms.

The AKS guarantees consistency in the curriculum across the district. Although *how* students learn may vary from class to class and school to school, *what* students learn is the same. Any Gwinnett second grader in any school in any teacher's class is taught the same AKS as all other second graders in Gwinnett. The same is true for any student, at any grade level, or in any course. The AKS ensures it.

**How will my son's teacher know if he's learning the AKS as well as he should?**

Since the AKS outlines what the teacher is expected to teach, the many ways that a teacher "grades" your son's work should tell her something about how he is progressing. That would include tests, projects, reports, quizzes, homework, and daily classwork. More specific information will come from the Progress Checks in grades 1, 2 and 6, and from the Gateway tests in grades 4, 5, 7, 8, and 10.

In addition, teachers have learned about the AKS and the Gateway tests through staff development and faculty workshops. Particular resources they have asked for, such as sample test items and AKS checklists, have been provided. And technology is playing a bigger and bigger role in helping them teach the AKS and monitor how well their students are performing. Gwinnett employs the finest teachers in the profession, and we're equipping them well for their all-important work with our students.

**Students are so different as individuals. Will the AKS work for them all?**

The AKS offers a base of academics, a foundation for learning that teachers build on for each student. Certainly, students come to school with different educational backgrounds, learning styles, and ability levels. Many even speak a different language. Yet all students will need to learn the essential knowledge and skills included in the AKS in order to be successful in life.

So, the difference should not be in what we expect students to learn, but in how we will teach the AKS and how much time some students will need to learn them. We are working now to identify the most effective ways of teaching the AKS to students with special needs. After the trial runs of the Gateway tests in the spring of 1998 and 1999, we will have a better idea of how many students will need extra help, and what kind of help will be needed.

**The concept of the Gateway tests and no social promotion is a little scary. What if my daughter doesn't pass?**

Be assured we want your child to succeed, not fail. That's why we developed the AKS and Gateway structure in the first place. It tells everyone what students should be learning and provides checkpoints along the way to make sure they are doing so.

Most students will be well-prepared for the Gateway tests through their regular classroom learning. We are working with reputable test developers to make sure these important tests match our curriculum. And we've spent a lot of time "testing the tests" in trial runs with our own students.

## Example 9 (continued)

If your daughter does not pass a Gateway test on the first try, she will have the chance to improve her score on a retest. But first, her teacher and school will work with her on areas the test showed to be her trouble spots. She may need to spend more time on certain skills, or be taught the information in a different way. Many "interventions" have been developed and will be provided to help her succeed.

Realistically, some students may not be able to pass the Gateway even after extensive help. For their long-term benefit and future success in school, these students will be given more time to learn the skills and knowledge they need through an additional year in the same grade.

At the high school level, passing the 10th grade Gateway test will be required for graduation. Students will have several opportunities to retake the test before the end of 12th grade.

**Bottom line, why is this structure better for my child?**

You answer this one. Ask yourself: Is it important for students, parents, and teachers to know clearly what is expected in the classroom? Should all Gwinnett schools be accountable for providing each student a world-class education? Does it make sense to have consistent standards for teachers to use in planning instruction, interventions, and extensions for students? As a parent, do you want to know with confidence that when your child graduates, he is well prepared for whatever path he will take next?

If you feel as we do, you answered "Yes" to these questions—and in essence have found the answer to your own.

**Who can answer my questions on the AKS, Gateway tests, and my child's education?**

If you have a question on the AKS or academic achievement in Gwinnett County Public Schools, the best place to start is your local school. Specific questions or concerns about the education of your child should be directed first to your child's teacher. In addition, your school principal can provide a school-level perspective. Questions of a systemwide nature can be answered by the Center for Educational Programs at 770/513-6619.

*For more information, contact the Gwinnett County Public Schools at 770/963-8651 or visit their web site at www.gwinnett.k12.ga.us*

### Content recommendations

*Recommendation 6: Provide examples of what students need to know and be able to do (and let parents know how they can obtain complete descriptions)*

Parents want to know what the test is testing. Whether your state uses the term "standard," "curriculum framework," or "goals" to describe expectations of what a student should know and be able to do, it is clear that providing this information is effective in helping parents understand what the test is all about. In most cases, parents won't want examples of every standard (and it will be impossible to include complete sets of standards in an easy-to-read communication piece), but they will want to know where to go (such as a local library or web address) or where to call for a more complete set of the standards.

In Ohio's *Fact Sheet on Twelfth-grade Mathematics*, the learning outcomes are presented in five strands—arithmetic, measurement, data analysis, algebra/functions, and geometry. These represent the mathematical abilities students are expected to possess and use by the time they complete high school. On the following page is the description Ohio gave parents for arithmetic and measurement.

## Example 10

### TWELFTH-GRADE MATHEMATICS

**Strand 1 - Arithmetic** (5 questions)

1. *Compare, order, and determine equivalence of real numbers.*

   This includes understanding of the relationships among integers, decimals, fractions, percents, and irrational numbers. Any combination of these types of numbers may appear in a question, testing the ability to translate from one form to another for the purpose of comparison. Items may include the use of negative numbers and small integer exponents.

2. *Estimate answers, compute, and solve problems involving real numbers.*

   This includes basic arithmetic operations and estimation using integers, decimals, fractions, percents, or irrational numbers. Items testing estimation will make clear that an exact computation is not desired.

**Strand 2 - Measurement** (5 questions)

3. *Determine area and volume.*

   This includes understanding the concepts of area and volume, and the ability to find the areas and volumes of simple geometric shapes or combinations of simple geometric shapes. Questions may require understanding of the relationships among length, area, and volume. Knowledge of the formulas for the areas of rectangles, circles, and triangles will be assumed, along with knowledge of the formula for the volume of a rectangular solid. Any other formulas needed will be provided as part of the question. Answers involving $\pi$ will either be given in terms of $\pi$, or an approximation of $\pi$ will be provided.

4. *Estimate and use measurements.*

   This includes understanding common measurement units of time, length, area, weight, velocity, etc., and the ability to choose the appropriate unit. Applications and estimations (including visual estimation) are included. The ability to determine the relative size of one measure with respect to another may also be included.

For more information, contact the Ohio Department of Education at 614/466-0223 or visit their web site at www.ode.ohio.gov

West Virginia creates brochures targeted toward parents for children in specific grades. For example, the 1st grade brochure lists the instructional goals and objectives in six different subject areas: mathematics, English/language arts, science, health education, social studies, and art and music. The standards presented for English/language arts include:

**Example 11**

**ENGLISH/LANGUAGE ARTS**

*Students will grow in language development through reading, writing, speaking and listening from reading fiction, non-fiction and poetry that reflects cultures, experiences and ideas.*

- 1.5 Identify synonyms, antonyms, and homonyms
- 1.7 Make inferences from story characters
- 1.8 Use story content and personal background to make predictions
- 1.11 Identify beginning, middle and end of a narrative selection
- 1.12 Given a narrative, repeat the correct sequence of events
- 1.13 Remember specific details, interpret and extend meaning, and evaluate material
- 1.23 Identify single consonants/sounds in initial, medial and final word positions
- 1.32 Identify and use contractions
- 1.44 Follow written directions sequentially to achieve a desired result
- 1.92 Capitalize first word in a sentence, the pronoun "I," months of the year, days of the week, and names of people
- 1.93 Identify and use correct punctuation: period, question mark, and exclamation point
- 1.94 Use correct subject-verb agreement with corresponding proper verb information
- 1.97 Identify and correct errors in sentence construction and language expression
- 1.103 Identify words in alphabetical order beginning with different letters and beginning with the same letter

*For more information, visit the West Virginia Department of Education's web site at wvde.state.wv.us.*



***Recommendation 7: Provide examples of test questions and examples of student work (those that meet the standard, those that do not meet the standard, and explanations as to why)***

Including test questions and examples of student work are critical to any communications document; they enliven explanations of the standards and flesh out abstractions such as "rigor" and "challenging." In addition, they also provide parents with an idea of what the test will actually *look like*.

Including examples of student work that meet a standard (and examples that do not meet a standard) allows parents to internalize what "good" and "not-so-good" work looks like. Explaining how answers are rated and scored helps parents understand what kinds of improvements are needed. Examples can help alleviate some common concerns about the new tests, such as how a mathematics problem will be scored if the student applies the correct concepts and applications but incorrectly calculates the final number. Finally, providing examples of test items and corresponding student work, in addition to the standard that the item tests, creates a powerful communications tool.

Unfortunately, few communications documents manage to bring together the standard, the test item, and sample student responses that reflect a range of work. Many include only sample test items. A few states make teacher guides to the tests available for parents. These guides often include descriptions of the scoring method, scoring criteria, and student examples that reflect each of those criteria. However, rarely are these documents useful to parents.

Two states that are trying to bring at least two of these three pieces together for parents are Rhode Island and Washington. The Washington State Commission on Student Learning has published a guide titled *Understanding the New 4th- and 7th-Grade Tests*, which provides parents with test questions from the three areas tested: reading, writing, and mathematics. It provides an overview of each test's goals and explains how the tests will be scored. On the following page is an example of a 4th grade mathematics question, actual student answers, and a description of how the answers are rated.

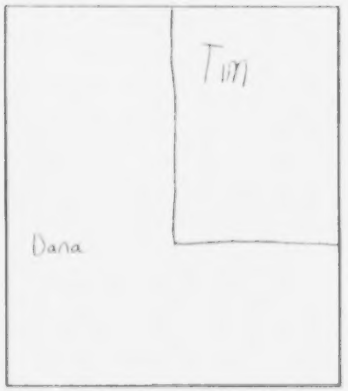
*Mathematics: Sample Student Responses, 4th Grade*

4th Grade

EXAMPLE #1

**Directions:** Tim and Dana are asked to mow Mr. Kumar's lawn. The first day, Dana mows half of the lawn by herself. The next day, Tim and Dana finish the other half of the lawn. This time, Tim mows twice as much as Dana.

Use the space below to show how much of the lawn each person mowed.




Mr. Kumar pays Tim and Dana a total of $30 for mowing his lawn.

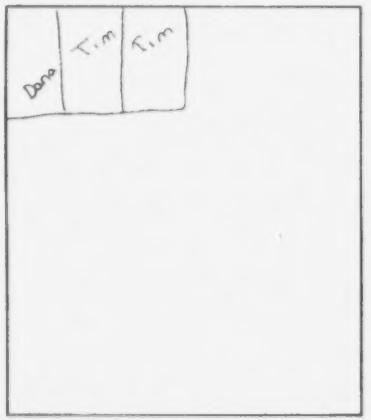
Tell how Tim and Dana should divide the money fairly, based on the work they have done. Show your work. Explain your thinking using words, numbers, or pictures.

Tim mowed 2/6 of the lawn and Dana mowed 4/6. So if you split 30 into 6 you get 5. $5 times two is ten dollars for Tim and $5 times four is $20 for Dana.

EXAMPLE #2

**Directions:** Tim and Dana are asked to mow Mr. Kumar's lawn. The first day, Dana mows half of the lawn by herself. The next day, Tim and Dana finish the other half of the lawn. This time, Tim mows twice as much as Dana.

Use the space below to show how much of the lawn each person mowed.




Mr. Kumar pays Tim and Dana a total of $30 for mowing his lawn.

Tell how Tim and Dana should divide the money fairly, based on the work they have done. Show your work. Explain your thinking using words, numbers, or pictures.

I think Tim should get $20.00 and Dana should get $10.00.

3÷30=10

4th Grade







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Rhode Island's *Grade 4 Performance Assessment: Interpretation Guide for Families* provides similar information. In addition to presenting an actual student response and an analysis of that response, the guide explains the standard that the item is testing. Below is an example of a 4th grade essay (which is an "outstanding" response).

## Example 13

### Grade Four Writing Example: Score of 6

**English Language Arts Standard: Creation and Presentation of Text**

All students will compose clear text in a variety of forms for many purposes.

**Criteria for a Score of 6**

***An Outstanding Response:*** Presents thoughtful ideas and develops them logically, fully and clearly; is very well-organized from beginning to end; has a strong command of sentence structure; uses language effectively; has few intrusive errors in grammar and conventions (spelling, punctuation and capitalization). A "6" essay may be distinguished by features such as making insightful observations, using rich details, or creating an effective scene or mood.

**Grade 4 Writing Topic (Narrative Style of Writing)**

Everyone has something he or she enjoys doing. This could be something done at school, at home, in the neighborhood or anywhere. Write about something you enjoy doing.

Why I love Sleepovers

I love sleepovers! Exspecially with my best friends. We always laugh all night.

We rent and watch movies. Scary movies, comitay movies, long movies, every thing! Our favorite movie that my friends and I love is called Now and Then. We pretend we're the characters from it and it's really fun.

When our eyes get tired, we somehow get hungry so we make hunger fun by shooting popcorn balls in the air and trying to catch them in our mouths. By the time we're full, there is popcorn all over the floor.

Next, we sing comershal songs and we vote on our best comershal there is. We also play guessing games and get hungry again so we have a snack.

We go down stairs while our parents are asleep and grab the ice-cream, fudge, sprinkles, whipe cream, bowls, spoons, and cherries. We fill our arms with all that wonderful stuff and run back upstairs. When we're done we feel sick.

Later, one of my friends would call out: "Pillow fight!!" and everybody throws big pillows, small pillows, shaped pillows, and puffy pillows. We all go wild!

This is a "never ending" sleepover because when we all were just hanging out and another friend would always start telling a story. But not just any story, a story with..... GHASTS!!! Sometimes we all get scared and we hear the wind blowing outside. "Aaaahh!!!" we all scream "I knowed I won't fall asleep tonight" I always say and start to shake.

"I know something that will take our minds off this! Naming stuffed animals!" So we did. Snowflake, Vanilla, chocolate, stripes, Mr. Happy. We named a lot of stuffed animals.

So thats what I do at sleepovers. Play with food, watch movies, sing songs, have ice-cream, have pillow fights, tell ghost stories, and play with stuffed animals. But I know one thing I know I'll never do at a sleepover is sleep

ANALYSIS:

The student's essay on sleepovers is a very well developed response to the topic. The writer uses descriptive language well, presents rich details and creates an effective scene.

NOTE:

Scores appear in a range of 2 to 12 since each essay is read and scored twice for a single total score.

*Recommendation 8: Use clear and concise language to define technical terms; avoid jargon*

Testing can be a technical subject, and it is often assumed that parents understand the terminology used in communication pieces and reports. More often than not, that assumption is incorrect. At a focus group held by the Goals Panel, parents were quick to point out that the terms "percentile rank" and "percentage" are confusing. They did not understand how if a 50% typically represents a failing grade on a test, a child who performs at the 50th percentile rank level would be considered "average." Other terms such as "mean," "stanine," "normal curve equivalent," and "proficient" also pose problems for parents.

Parents also commonly misunderstand "norm-referenced" and "criterion-referenced/standards-based"—two other terms that are appearing more and more frequently in communication pieces and reports. What parents may remember from their own testing experiences—number 2 pencils, filling in the bubbles completely, and how they did compared to others in their group—probably will not provide them with the background necessary to understand the differences between these terms.

Keep in mind that parents don't intuitively know that the words "standards" and "standardized" — two words that sound an awful lot alike —don't mean the same thing when it comes to testing.

One effective way to explain the differences between a norm-referenced test and a standards-based test is through the creation of a visual. *Colorado's Statewide Assessment Public Engagement Kit* presents a lucid explanation:

> *Perhaps the best way to understand the difference between the nationally standardized assessments most of us are familiar with and the new statewide assessments that are standards-referenced is to picture a group of students climbing a mountain. A norm-referenced assessment would tell you which student is in the lead, how many are grouped around the middle, and who is lagging behind. But it will not tell you where they are on the mountainside. On the other hand, the results of standards-referenced assessments, such as the one in the Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP), will provide the location of any given student in relation to the mountaintop.*

The Washington State Partnership for Learning puts it this way:

> *The goal of traditional tests (such as the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills) is to learn how students compare to each other. In this way, these tests are similar to the sorts of tests a pediatrician gives a newborn baby. For example, the doctor measures and compares the height of your baby and then tells you how this information compares to other babies—how many are taller, how many are shorter, and how many are "about average" for their age. Think of Washington's new tests like the tests you take to earn a driver's license. It doesn't matter what the average score on the test is or whether some drivers scored above or below you. What matters is whether you can show you have the skills and knowledge to "meet the standard" and get a license.*

*Recommendation 9: Provide tips for parents—suggestions they can use to encourage their children to develop their skills and knowledge and improve their academic performance*

Parents want to know what they can be doing *now* to help their children improve their educational performance. The tips need to go beyond "make sure your child gets a good night's sleep prior to testing day," although such suggestions are important. States that have begun to include "tips for parents" often embrace some of the following:

- Stressing the importance of education at home by setting high expectations for a child, monitoring homework, and showing interest in school;
- Reading to and with the child;
- Engaging teachers in conversations about the child's performance in school and on the state assessment;
- Turning "everyday" activities and chores into learning experiences.

In *Now Your Child Has Good Reason to Act Like a Know-It-All*, the Washington State Partnership for Learning offers a list of suggestions.

**Example 14**

## There's something even more powerful than the new standards. You.

While clear standards will help improve teaching and learning in our schools, parents still play the biggest role. By encouraging your child to develop his or her skills and knowledge, you'll be sending the message that a good education is important.

**Here are ten things you can do to help your child:**

**2** Read to your younger child. Ask an older child to read to you. And make sure your children see you reading, too. Helping your child develop strong reading habits and skills from the beginning, and reinforcing these as your child grows, is one of the most important contributions you can make to your child's education.

**3** Expect that homework will be done. Keep track of your child's homework assignments, and regularly look at his or her completed work. There's a strong link between academic success and the amount of homework done.

**4** Feed your child's curiosity about the world 365 days a year. Visit zoos, museums, and cultural events together, and help your child learn everything possible about the experiences. Learning is not limited to the classroom.

— When you ask your child what he or she did in school today, don't take "oh, nothing" for an answer. Your child needs to know that you have more than a passing interest in what he or she does in school. The more questions you ask, the stronger the message you send that learning is important.

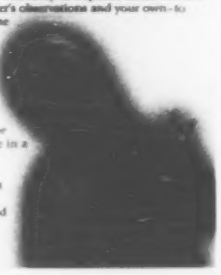
**6** Encourage group study. Open your home to your child's friends for informal study sessions. Promote outside formal study groups through scouts, church, or school organizations. Study groups will be especially important as your child becomes older and more independent.

**7** Ask the teacher what skills and knowledge your child will be expected to learn during the year. Be specific. For example, what should your child learn in math by the end of the second grade? Look for evidence that the school is teaching these things and your child is learning them.

**8** Study results from the new state tests. Be sure to ask teachers about scores that may indicate a skill deficiency or a special talent. Use this information—along with the teacher's observations and your own—to make sure your child is learning the right skills and knowledge.

**9** Spend time in the classroom. The best way to know what goes on in your child's school is to spend time there. If you're a working parent, this isn't easy, and you may not be able to do it very often. But "once in a while" is better than "never."

**10** Remember, you're the most important influence on your child. The new standards and tests give you important tools to ensure your child gets the best education possible.



*For more information about the Partnership for Learning, see Section IV, contact the Partnership at 206/625-9655, or visit their web site at www.partnership-wa.org.*

Similar kinds of "tips for parents" can also be provided on the actual student report. The following suggestions appear on the Michigan Educational Assessment Program's *4th-Grade Essential Skills Mathematics Test* student report:

**Example 15**

**How can I help my child do better in mathematics?**

- Ask your child to tell you what was discussed in mathematics class today.
- Provide quiet study space for homework.
- Encourage a positive attitude toward mathematics by playing number games or talking about how numbers are used in stores, in the newspaper, or on TV.
- Most careers now require some mathematical skills; older students need to ask many different workers about the ways they use mathematics and technology on the job.

*For more information, contact the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) Office at 517/373-8393.*

States need to make it clear to parents that helping their child prepare for the new types of assessments require attention. Household projects and family trips can be invaluable in helping children learn some of the most basic problem-solving, communication, and thinking skills they will need.

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Maryland's *Parent Handbook for Better Schools* goes beyond listing tips by providing examples of household projects to help children learn:

### Example 16

**In the kitchen:** Have your child help you cook. Cooking usually requires reading, gathering together the proper materials, measuring out exact amounts, and organizing steps in the proper order.

**Traveling:** When planning a trip, get out the map and have your child plot the route and determine the distance you have to travel. If you're taking public transportation, let your child help pick the best bus route. If you're taking a car, tell your child how many miles per gallon your car gets and ask him or her to figure out how many gallons of gas you will need for the trip. During or after the trip, help your child create a written travel log to share with family and friends.

**Gardening:** If you are planting a garden, first go to the library with your child and read more about what you might want to plant and how to do it. Together, find out about different plants and let your child help pick some seeds that would grow well in your area. Ask your child to help figure out how much space you will need depending on which seeds you plant.

*For more information, contact the Maryland State Department of Education at (410)767-0373.*



**What are the ways that states can communicate with parents?**

After listening to the parents in your state, the next step is deciding *how* to implement their wants—what type of tools should be created? States often publish full-color brochures, flyers, or newsletters. An increasing number of states have recently launched web sites from which parents can download information or visit a chat room and ask questions. Additional ideas on how to communicate with parents include:

- video
- television
- radio
- billboards
- cassette tapes
- 1-800 line/hotline
- CD-ROMs
- calendars
- religious bulletins
- leadership institutes
- workshops

Some parents may want or be able to take in more information than others; communication pieces disseminated to a particular parent group should match its capabilities and wants.

The Edmonds School District in Washington State created a school district calendar that describes some of the measures used to provide evidence of learning in the district, such as the new Washington State test and the district assessments. Each month is dedicated to explaining a different assessment and provides parents with important dates to remember (see Example 17 on the following page).

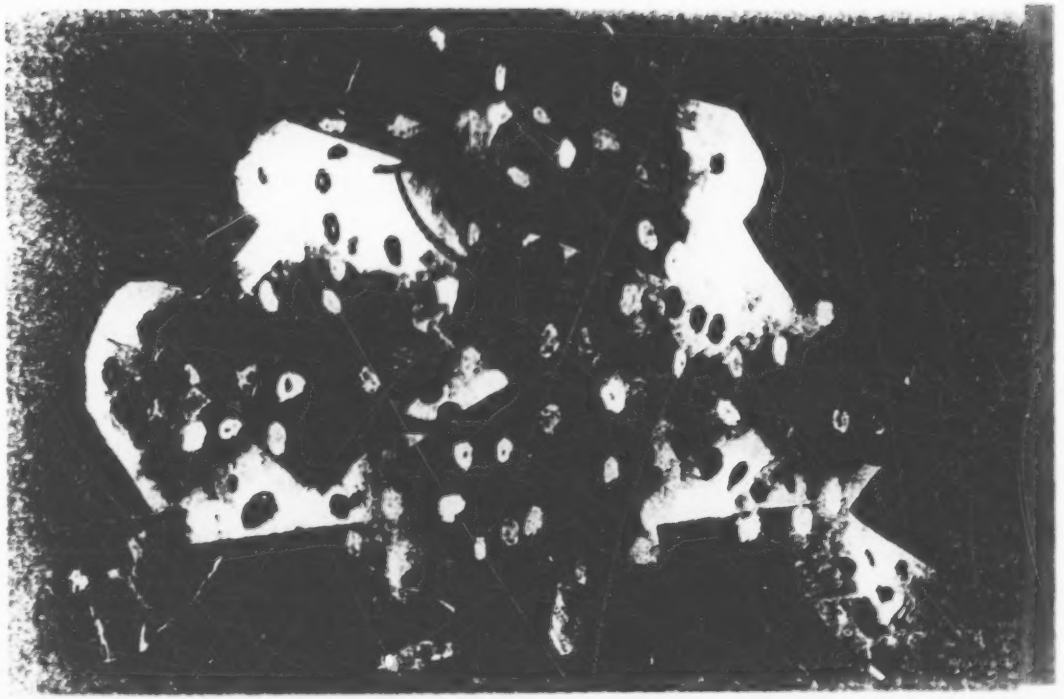
For a description of the Kentucky Parent Leadership Institute program and the workshops held by the Florida PTA, see Close-up III (p. 25).

# A new test for Washington

## Comparing student performance to a standard

You can expect to hear news this month about how fourth grade students performed on a test developed specifically to measure whether they have achieved the basics: reading, writing, math, and listening.

Schools in our district leaped at the invitation to take the test last spring on a voluntary basis. This year's fourth graders will be required to take the test, which measures progress in achieving Washington's Essential Academic Learning Requirements. Coming next in this series: tests for seventh and tenth grade.



Kelcie Kuhn • Brier Elementary • Age 7

**Test Dates**

| | |
|---|---|
| Washington Assessment of Student Learning Grades 4 and 7 | April 20–May 8 |

*For more information, contact the Edmonds School District at 425/670-7047*

## Building mechanisms for dissemination

To disseminate information well, mechanisms also need to be sensitive to language and cultural barriers.

Some ways to address these barriers include:

- Making district and school grounds and buildings family friendly;
- Addressing language barriers with interpreters, translated materials, and bilingual staff; and
- Reducing mistrust and cultural barriers by creating parent resource centers, holding workshops, and encouraging home visits.

*Adapted from* Strong Families, Strong Schools. *For more information, or to request a copy of the report contact the U.S. Department of Education at 800/USA-LEARN.*

Tools can be effective only when they get into the hands of parents. And because, more often than not, states do not send materials directly to parents, it is critical to build mechanisms for dissemination from the state to the local level and then directly to parents. States need to clearly understand who they can rely on for dissemination, as well as identify the most trusted sources that parents go to for information.

Some ways to build the mechanisms for dissemination to parents include:

- Subsidizing districts' costs of using direct mail;
- Considering developing public service announcements (PSAs) to let parents know when test results will be released—this can act as a reminder to parents to start asking for the results, or to look for the results if they are being mailed directly to homes;
- Encouraging districts to work with the local PTA and Title I/Chapter 1 groups;
- Ensuring that school districts know and understand the format of the test reports and the specific timing of the test score release;
- Holding school districts accountable for disseminating and communicating test score results to parents; and
- Regularly reviewing test reporting practices and communications to parents by conducting surveys and focus group sessions.



CLOSE-UP III:

## Other ways to communicate—Lessons from Florida and Kentucky

### Parent Workshops

The Florida PTA is using its annual convention to share information about the new Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT). Parents come from across the state to learn about:

- The achievement levels and the implication of these levels for students, parents, and teachers;
- How to more effectively prepare students for the FCAT; and
- What types of questions the students will have to answer by providing parents a chance to actually take practice examinations.

*For more information, contact the Florida PTA at 800/373-5782 or visit their web site at www.floridapta.org.*

### Parent Leadership Program

The Commonwealth Institute for Parent Leadership, a program of the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence, the Kentucky Congress of Parents and Teachers and the Association of Older Kentuckians, seeks to engage all parents, including those who have the most difficulty being involved. It supports parents as they become effective advocates for improved education and increased achievement for all students in their communities. Through substantive, multi-disciplinary learning and interactive curriculum, it:

- Provides parents with information and strategies to take an active role in their children's education as well as in the larger education community;
- Motivates parents to assume leadership roles in their public schools and communities;
- Recognizes parents who have been active education volunteers and moves them to the next level of involvement.

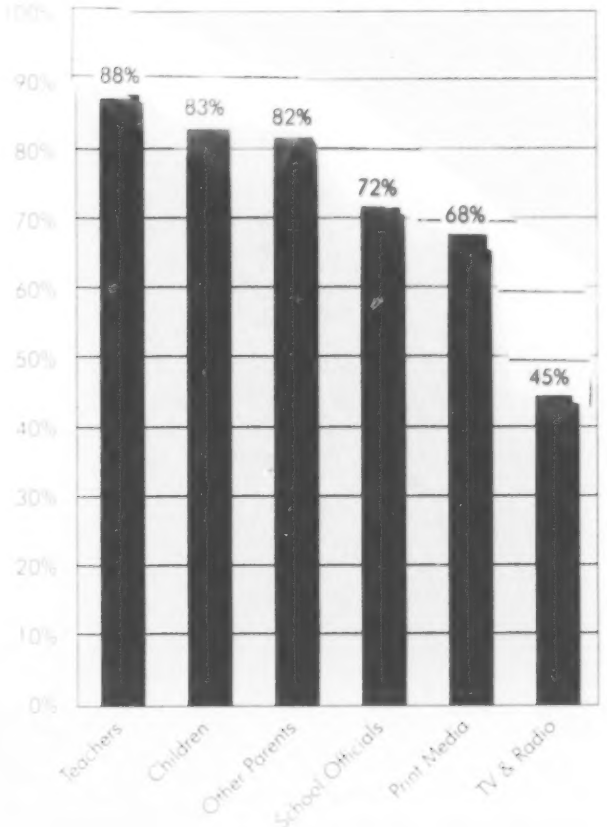
Each year two hundred participants attend regional institutes that include three two-day sessions, as well as a statewide conference of all participants. Each participant commits to design and carry out projects to involve other parents in their communities and schools.

*For more information about the Prichard Committee, see* **Section IV** *or contact the Committee at 606/233-9849 or at cipl@prichardcommittee.org.*

**Using the parent-teacher conference and print media**

Two of the more trusted sources of information for parents on issues related to education are teachers and print media (see chart below). Teachers are critical, particularly in the context of the parent-teacher conference, because they are an effective resource to help parents better understand what children are expected to know, what they must be able to do, and what kind of progress they are making. The media are also useful, particularly because of their visibility. Both can be powerful dissemination tools.

**Who Parents Rely on Heavily or Somewhat Heavily as Sources of Information about Education Issues**[a]




*Creating a powerful parent-teacher conference*

Creating a powerful parent-teacher conference requires recognizing that the standards and new assessments are also new for teachers. While parents *are* their child's first teacher, most parents do not have the background to fully understand the details about the assessment. Their lack of information does not mean that they are uninterested in knowing more, but it does underscore the importance of providing teachers with training to effectively engage parents in the parent-teacher conference. Teachers will need to know how to read and interpret the assessment and then suggest actions based on the results of the assessment, both for themselves in their classrooms and for talking with parents during conferences. Tips to help teachers successfully engage parents in discussion about assessment results include the following:

1. **Make sure teachers know the purpose of the state assessment results.** The purpose should be provided in writing and teachers should participate in discussions about the purpose of the assessment.

2. **Make sure teachers know how to accurately read the report.** Parents expect a fairly clear bottom line: the student is doing better, keeping up, or falling behind. Teachers need to be able to provide this type of information. Once they have the "big picture," parents are ready for details on what they can do to help.

   Teachers therefore need information explaining how to read the report. They need to know what kinds of questions were asked of the students and what parents can be doing at home to help their child.

3. **Make sure teachers know how to tell parents about results that may not be good.** Teachers need models of how to explain low results on assessments aligned with challenging high standards. In addition, teachers need to know how to explain why the results on the different tests seem to tell very different stories about the student's performance. Printed sample scripts that could be used at "back-to-school" nights or conferences are very helpful. Be honest about the results, and move on to what is being planned to change the weak results or to celebrate the good results.

## CLOSE-UP IV:

## Helping teachers engage parents effectively—Lessons from Kentucky

### 1. Making sure teachers know the purpose of the state assessment results.

- A monthly newsletter is mailed to teachers at home.
- A toll-free phone line is available for teachers and others for assessment and accountability information. This line is staffed by the testing contractor so teachers may ask very specific questions about their school reports as well as receive general information.
- Each school district has been asked to designate a district assessment coordinator who is the liaison between the district and the state regarding assessment and accountability information. They meet with state department representatives as needed to prepare for assessment administration, release of test data, and so on. In some of the larger school districts, each school is asked to designate an assessment coordinator who is the liaison between the district and school.
- The state department maintains a web site where teachers can access information about ongoing projects and events including assessment and accountability.

### 2. Making sure teachers know how to accurately read the report.

- Eight regional service centers serve the state. Each center has an assessment and accountability consultant who is available to districts and schools for technical assistance (analysis of data), training, and information.
- Prior to the release of test data, the state department prepares a briefing packet that includes a Q & A on assessment and accountability, test data, a glossary of terms, and so on. This is distributed to the district and school assessment coordinators for sharing with teachers.
- Prior to the release of test data, the state department holds live broadcasts over educational television to brief school personnel. These can be watched live or taped for later viewing.
- The state department produces an "interpretive guide" to help school personnel understand test data. This is distributed to the assessment coordinators, who are to share it with teachers.
- Teachers and parents were included in focus groups that looked at individual student and school reports for assistance in designing informative reports.

### 3. Making sure teachers know how to tell parents about results that may not be good.

- Toolkits were made available through the regional service centers so schools could hold parent and community workshops on performance events, to help the public understand changes in testing.
- The trainer-of-trainers model was used to help teachers understand how to assess student writing portfolios. This prepared teachers to assess writing and better explain good writing to parents.

*For more information, contact the Kentucky Department of Education at 502/564-3301 or visit their web site at www.kde.state.ky.us.*

For some examples from Kentucky on how to implement these suggestions, see **Close-up IV**.

Once teachers have been better prepared to discuss the purpose of the assessment and the results, the parent-teacher conference can become a more effective tool. Some ways to ensure its effectiveness include:

1. **Define the purpose of the parent-teacher conference to include discussions around the state assessment.** Teachers need to understand early on that the purpose of the conference is to communicate about student progress as a whole, not just classroom assignments. Teachers need to be able to discuss the new standards, the new assessments, and what the results mean. For tips on how to help teachers successfully engage parents in a discussion about these topics, see **Close-up IV**.

2. **Rethink the scheduling of parent-teacher conferences.** Teachers often do not discuss progress on state assessments because they do not have access to the results in time for the conferences. Plan conferences at times when teachers have all the information needed to give parents a complete picture on how students are performing.

3. **Maximize the connection between back-to-school night and parent-teacher conferences.** Use back-to-school nights to provide general information about the standards and assessment results

(both district and state results), and then follow up with specific student information at the parent-teacher conference. This sequence allows parents time to absorb the information and prepare specific questions to ask during the conference. Give parents some ideas of questions they might ask the teacher about the state assessment. State leaders can assist schools and districts by providing a sample script for a back-to-school night that effectively incorporates discussion of state assessments as part of the important information parents should know.

For some ideas on how to implement these suggestions, see **Close-up V**.

***Using the media***

Another key tool in communicating the assessment results to parents is the print media. As indicated on the graph on page 26, nearly 7 out of 10 parents rely on print media as a source of information about education issues. *Education Week* recently called the local newspaper the "new accountability player." States can work with the media in myriad ways when communicating state test results to parents:

- To provide comparative data;
- To provide examples of test items and explanations as to how they are scored;
- To show examples of districts or schools that have shown significant improvement over time, successfully aligned standards to the state tests and shown improvements as a result, and rallied local community support for state tests; and
- To provide leads for human-interest stories—linking state tests to real people, such as individual teachers, parents, business groups, community and religious groups, and principals.

To best use the print media, states should keep certain issues in mind:

- Define scores clearly and provide descriptions of how parents and community members can use the information;
- Ensure direct access to test score data for reporters (electronic or otherwise);
- Provide resources (national experts or state officials) to reporters on standards and assessments to add clarity and legitimacy to the statewide testing effort;
- Develop background papers, commonly asked questions, fact sheets, and calendars with key dates; and
- Provide reporters with state-level contacts to answer specific questions.

See **Close-up VI** (p. 30) for some ideas from Indiana and Texas on how to work more closely with the media when reporting test scores.

CLOSE-UP V:

## Promoting better communication via the parent-teacher conference—Lessons from the Thompson School District (Loveland, CO)

### 1. Include discussions about the state assessment.

- Review a variety of achievement indicators to provide a more accurate and complete picture of a student's academic progress. Teachers can help parents gain a better understanding by describing the child's performance in situations that require mostly independent work from the child, such as in state or district testing situations, compared to classroom performance where teacher prompts, cues, or help is frequently available during work time. Teachers should treat each piece of information, including the state assessments, as a piece of the puzzle, each contributing to a greater understanding of the student's progress.

- Use statements such as, "In our conference today, I want to share several different pieces of information about John's progress in meeting standards. Let's review John's district test results in reading, his state reading and writing test results, and his first quarter report card. All of these can help us plan what instruction John needs next." As a result of the conference, the parent wants to know if John is on the right track related to the expectations, and what the parent can do to help.

### 2. Rethink when parent-teacher conferences are scheduled.

- Schedule parent-teacher conferences at times of the year when teachers are likely to have the most information about student progress *including* results on important district and state assessments.

  Mary Blair Elementary schedules conferences after the first two weeks of school. Teachers review achievement results from the end of the previous school year (which can include state assessment results) and ask parents for information that will help the student have a successful school year. The purpose of the early conference is to promote early collaboration in planning for the student's instructional needs.

  Conrad Ball Middle School schedules the first conference of the year just six weeks after school starts. Teachers review initial pretesting and expectations for the school year.

  Turner Middle School uses the last few days of school to have students individually present to their parents what they have learned during their three years at Turner Middle School. Students can also invite other teachers, principals, and community members. Students can be very insightful when explaining their performance on important classroom, district, and state assessments to their parents.

- Schools might consider having an early conference and two follow-up teacher conferences during the year.

### 3. Maximize the connection between back-to-school night and the parent-teacher conference.

When schools connect information provided to parents at back-to-school nights to information provided at parent-teacher conferences, communication between school and home can be greatly enhanced.

- Back-to-school night is used as an opportunity for teachers to share expected standards for students; curriculum maps that outline the units for the year and which standards are addressed in those units; and what information the teacher will be collecting to document student progress.

- Teachers share rubrics (scoring guides) and sample test items to clarify what students will be expected to learn. Parents leave knowing what the student's day looks like, how to contact the teacher, and what level of performance is expected.

Parent-teacher conferences can serve as follow-up to back-to-school night by allowing teachers to discuss assessment results, make classroom observations, and so forth, that relate to the standards and examples shared during back-to-school night. The conference can focus on student progress, effort, and attitude rather than how the classroom operates. Give parents as much of the information as possible before the conference so they have time to review it. Many teachers review the information with the students during class time, have the student review the information with the parent before the conference, and then use the parent-teacher conference time for interpretation and planning based on the information.

*For more information, contact the Thompson School District at 970/669-3940.*

## CLOSE-UP VI:
## Reporting test scores using the media—Lessons from Indiana and Texas

### Indiana—Reporters taking the test

In Indiana, State Superintendent Suellen Reed decided that media representatives should see the high school graduation qualifying exam, newly implemented in 1997, so that they could accurately report to parents and the public what is expected of students. Since the Indiana General Assembly had required the state to release the constructed response items, essays, and open-ended math problems once they were given, Dr. Reed chose to release them to the reporters. Print, television, and radio media representatives arrived at the state house on the last day of the statewide administration of the high school qualifying exam and were themselves administered one-half of the reading items (multiple-choice and constructed response) and one-half of the mathematics items. They took the test as if they were students, using the same materials and the same administration procedures. They signed confidentiality agreements stating that while they could "describe" the kinds of multiple-choice items that were on the test, they would release only the open-ended items.

The result of this effort was in-depth press coverage that described the content of the test and refuted some criticisms that the constructed response items were value-laden. Most of the reporters agreed that the kinds of skills measured on the test were important things for students to know and that the test content was "academic," not personal. Now when these media representatives are asked about the test, they can respond from the experience of having taken it.

*For more information, contact the External Affairs Office of the Indiana Department of Education at 317/232-6614.*

### Texas—Communicating all year long

Under the Texas Education Code, public school accountability data must be disseminated, regardless of whether members of the media find the information newsworthy. However, the print and electronic media in Texas have historically carried the stories because parents and taxpayers want the information. Effectively, the direct reporting requirements built into the Code have spurred a demand for additional media coverage.

The Commissioner of Education regularly communicates with members of the Texas media through press conferences and press releases. The agency routinely e-mails its press releases to over 500 journalists and media outlets as well as to all 20 Regional Education Service Centers (RESC's) in Texas. The agency also publishes extensive accountability-related information on its web site at www.tea.state.tx.us. Many school districts also use their web sites to disseminate district and campus performance data.

The dissemination of accountability data occurs year round, beginning in May and continuing through the following March, when the agency distributes its annual Snapshot publication, which summarizes state- and district-level performance data. In the latter part of May, each local school district receives the "individual" Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) results for each of the students in the district. In early June, the Commissioner of Education traditionally holds a press conference to release the statewide "all students" TAAS results. Local media cover the release of this information. This information is also posted on the agency's web site.

In August, district summaries and district- and campus-level data tables are provided to each school district and RESC. On the same day, the Commissioner traditionally holds a press conference to release the district and campus performance ratings (exemplary, recognized, academically acceptable, or academically unacceptable). Parents, local school districts, and the media can obtain this data on the agency's web site. Both print and electronic media report the ratings of the districts and campuses in their coverage areas.

In October, school districts receive district- and campus-level reports from the agency. The Texas Education Code requires local school boards to publish the annual reports. Local school boards must also hold a hearing for public discussion of the report. Taxpayers and parents in the district must receive notice of the hearing. A newspaper of general circulation in the district and electronic media serving the district must also receive notice of the hearing. State law further requires district- and campus-level decisionmaking committees to each hold a public meeting to discuss their performance.

In November of each school year, the agency prepares a report card for each campus. State law requires parents to receive the portions of the report cards that relate to student performance.

Independent organizations such as the Governor's Business Council and the Texas Business and Education Coalition further assist with the dissemination of accountability data in Texas. These organizations, whose members come from private industry, invest in independent analysis and reporting. In Texas, the involvement of private industry in public education further piques media interest.

The combination of strong accountability laws, private industry involvement, media coverage, and parental involvement has proved successful in Texas. For years, student performance has steadily improved. Parents and taxpayers equipped with information about the performance of their schools are able to hold the schools accountable.

## CLOSE-UP VI:
## Reporting test scores using the media—Lessons from Indiana and Texas (continued)

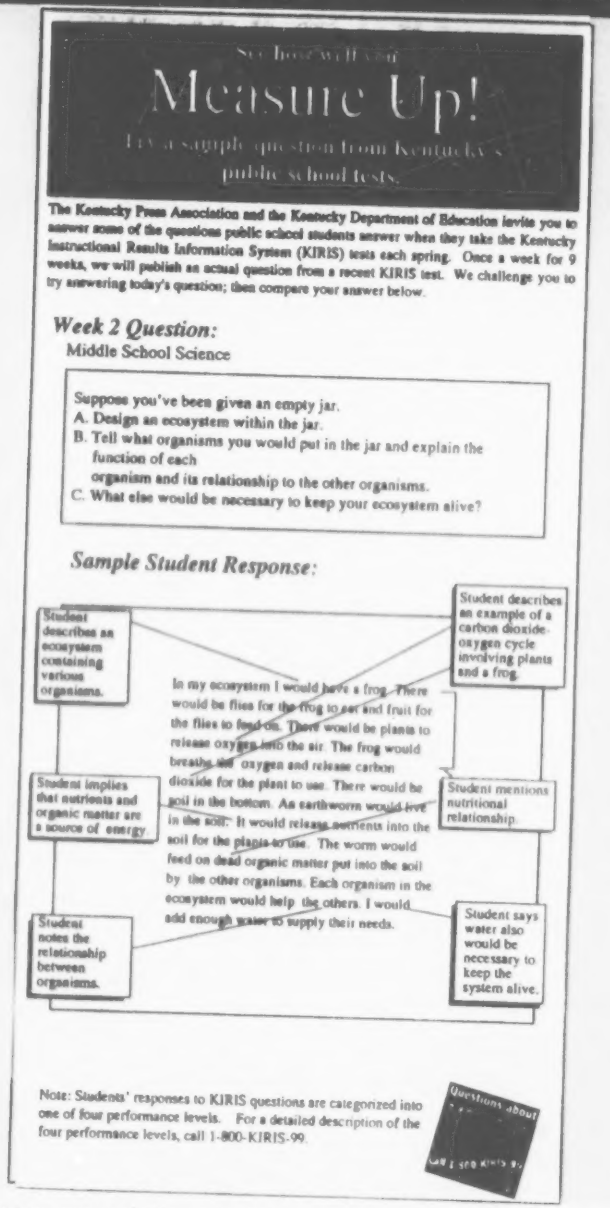
With over 6,000 schools in a highly decentralized system, it is impossible to measure the precise extent to which some of the less scholastic inputs to public education, such as parental involvement or media coverage, affect student performance. Yet it is clear that their involvement makes a difference, so the agency and private industry will encourage the continued involvement of parents and the media in Texas.

*For more information, contact the Governor's Business Council at 512/261-3447.*

Use of the media does not have to be limited to the reporting of test results. Media can be used prior to test administration too. For nine weeks prior to the Kentucky Instructional Results Information System (KIRIS) tests, students, parents, and members of the public were challenged by the Kentucky Department of Education and the Kentucky Press Association once a week to try a sample question from a recent KIRIS test. Printed at no cost by the Kentucky Press Association and appearing in various newspapers throughout the state, each weekly item represented a specific area (science, math, etc.) and level (elementary, middle, or high school) and included an annotated sample student response.



## Example 18



School will test

# Measure Up!

Try a sample question from Kentucky's public school tests.

**The Kentucky Press Association and the Kentucky Department of Education invite you to answer some of the questions public school students answer when they take the Kentucky Instructional Results Information System (KIRIS) tests each spring. Once a week for 9 weeks, we will publish an actual question from a recent KIRIS test. We challenge you to try answering today's question; then compare your answer below.**

***Week 2 Question:***

Middle School Science

Suppose you've been given an empty jar.
A. Design an ecosystem within the jar.
B. Tell what organisms you would put in the jar and explain the function of each
organism and its relationship to the other organisms.
C. What else would be necessary to keep your ecosystem alive?

***Sample Student Response:***

Student describes an ecosystem containing various organisms.

Student describes an example of a carbon dioxide-oxygen cycle involving plants and a frog.

In my ecosystem I would have a frog. There would be flies for the frog to eat and fruit for the flies to feed on. There would be plants to release oxygen into the air. The frog would breathe the oxygen and release carbon dioxide for the plant to use. There would be soil in the bottom. An earthworm would live in the soil. It would release nutrients into the soil for the plants to use. The worm would feed on dead organic matter put into the soil by the other organisms. Each organism in the ecosystem would help the others. I would add enough water to supply their needs.

Student implies that nutrients and organic matter are a source of energy.

Student mentions nutritional relationship.

Student notes the relationship between organisms.

Student says water also would be necessary to keep the system alive.

Note: Students' responses to KIRIS questions are categorized into one of four performance levels. For a detailed description of the four performance levels, call 1-800-KIRIS-99.

Questions about

*For more information, contact the Kentucky Department of Education at 502/564-3301 or visit their web site at www.kde.state.ky.us.*

Newspapers can also be used to provide tips for parents (see Recommendation 9, p. 21). In Florida, the *Tampa Tribune* has recently published a newspaper insert that includes activities for children and tips for how parents can engage their child in reading and learning—tips to assist parents in preparing their child for the new Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT).

## Example 19

1. Read with your children! Read billboards, street signs, maps, books, the information channel or the television schedule channel, their textbooks, library books, anything you see.

2. Get a library card and use it with your child.

3. Let your child see you reading for enjoyment.

4. Talk to your child about the importance of reading.

5. Subscribe to the newspaper.

6. Encourage your child.

7. The idea is for your child to enjoy reading, so try to help him or her find literature that is at the appropriate age and reading levels, dealing with a subject that interests him or her.

8. Avid readers "see" the story happening in their head, much like we see a movie screen. Stop occasionally when you are reading and help your child "see" the picture. This may take some effort at first, but it is an important part of reading comprehension.

9. Your child's reading teacher will have some ideas about helping your child read. The teacher knows what strengths and weaknesses your child has and will be able to suggest some books that he or she might enjoy reading.

10. Even if you do not have a child in school, volunteer for a few hours a month to listen to a child read.

11. Read, Read, Read!

*For more information, contact the Tampa Tribune at 813/259-7780.*



### Evaluating your tools

Gathering feedback on your communication tools is an important step too often overlooked. States need to think about evaluating these tools early on (as part of an entire communications strategy) and can start by asking a series of questions:

- What indicators or measures will we use to determine how well we are doing?
- Who are our audiences for gathering feedback?
- How will we gather the feedback?
- Are these specific materials (brochures, score cards, fact sheets, etc.) working?
- How will we change our strategy to reflect the communication gaps?

The Cincinnati (Ohio) public school district, with a student enrollment of over 49,000, measures the effectiveness of its communications tools annually. Each year, parents, teachers, and community members are surveyed on the quality, timeliness, and effectiveness of newsletters, annual progress reports, wall calendars, and back-to-school mailers.

The results, published and distributed to all audiences, are used to improve the overall strategic communications plan, which is tied to the district's five-year plan, *Students First*. For information on the type of questions asked, see **Close-up VII**.

CLOSE-UP VII

## Evaluating communication tools— Lessons from Cincinnati

The following are questions asked of parents, their responses, and actions the school district took to capitalize on those responses.

| Survey/Focus Group Question | Response | Action |
|---|---|---|
| Have you heard of "Students First," the district's five-year strategic plan and where did you hear about it? | No (67%)<br>Yes (33%)<br>Of the 33% that said "yes," 29% received information by mail through the district's communications department. | Developed tool kits and bulletin boards for principals and schools on Students First. Increased number of mailing to parents and included Students First initiative articles. Established web site location dedicated to Students First. Increased communications to principals and teachers and encouraged discussion at the local school level. |
| Rate the helpfulness of reports on the Ohio State Proficiency Tests and other standardized and achievement tests. | Very Helpful (41%)<br>Somewhat Helpful (40%)<br>Not Very Helpful (12%)<br>Don't Remember Receiving Reports (6%) | Simplified and aligned student progress reports with promotion standards and assessments. Improved the "rubric label" that defines the child's progress toward promotion and standards. Analyzed standardized achievement test parent reports with district's assessment and communications department. |
| Are you satisfied with the amount of information received about your child's academic progress? | 1996<br>Very Satisfied (61%)<br>Somewhat Satisfied (26%)<br>Not Satisfied (14%)<br>1997<br>Very Satisfied (61%)<br>Somewhat Satisfied (25%)<br>Not Satisfied (14%) | Although most parents were very satisfied or somewhat satisfied, there was not enough progress made over two years. District worked with outside consultants to develop more usable classroom tools to help teachers better understand and communicate academic progress to parents. Made improvement to the progress reports and the "rubric" label that measures the child's progress towards promotion that is sent home quarterly. |
| Do you feel adequately informed about the standards in the Cincinnati Public Schools? | Aware of the Standards (89%)<br>77% of parents who said that they are aware felt adequately informed about the standards. | Continue to produce parent mailers from the district office on standards and assessments. Continue to keep staff informed on the district's strategic plan. |

*For more information, contact the Cincinnati School District at 513/475-7001 or visit their web site at www.cpsboe.k12.oh.us.*

## SECTION III:

## Making Test Results More Meaningful

Informing parents about the standards, the tougher tests, and the new test questions is only the beginning. Once a student has taken the test, parents want to know the results.

Creating a school, district, or state report that is useful and understandable to parents is critical. In Maryland, the School and Community Outreach Office has developed an executive summary brochure of the Maryland School Performance Report, 1997. This summary provides parents with "1997 State Results at a Glance" and includes key information for the 24 districts across the state. Average state information is also included for easy comparisons. (see example on page 36)

In many states, reports based on the results of the state assessment are created (and sometimes mandated) at the state, district, or individual school building levels. These reports can offer comparative information, such as state assessment averages at the state, district, or school levels (which may or may not be included in an individual student report), as well as the average performance of various groups within the population. In addition, they often include other indicators of performance, such as attendance rates, dropout rates, and teacher preparation. This additional information can provide parents with a more complete picture of the academic environment of their child.

But these reports do not provide parents with the information to properly evaluate how well their child is doing. Individual student score reports do, and the importance of these reports is growing. The most recent reauthorization of Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act calls for parents of participating children to be provided with the following by the 2000-2001 school year:

For a detailed look at some of the more popular score reports from the major test publishers, and parents' perceptions of these score reports, see Appendix A on page 65.

*School performance profiles and their children's individual student assessment results, including an interpretation of those results, in addition to a description and explanation of the curriculum in use at the school, the forms of assessment used to measure student progress, and the proficiency levels students are expected to meet.*

Too often, however, individual student reports are not very clear. In some cases, these reports provide too little information. Parents may have a hard time determining their child's performance solely on the basis of a percentile rank, a percentage of questions answered correctly, or a term describing a level of achievement if there is no description of what these numbers or words mean. In other cases, these reports provide too much detail and leave the parent without an effective understanding of how their child performed. "Translating" an individual child's performance on a state test requires a balance between providing too little information and too much information.

How is that balance achieved? How does a state effectively translate an individual child's performance on

John Tanner, Director for Assessment and Analysis in the Delaware Department of Education, believes that the parent report can be used as a tool to communicate to parents and staff about a new testing program. He tells the following story:

When new legislation on testing and accountability was passed in Delaware, constituents—teachers, parents, and local districts—were concerned about the changes the new legislation would bring and demanded something tangible that would clarify the new legislation for them.

Enter the parent reports.

Delaware education staff designed hypothetical parent reports with the kinds of information they hoped to produce.

These mock reports provided clarification in two ways:

- The reports left staff with a clearer idea of the task at hand and helped to create a clear and consistent internal message.
- The reports also enhanced the department's ability to communicate more clearly with parents by providing the basis for a standard presentation.

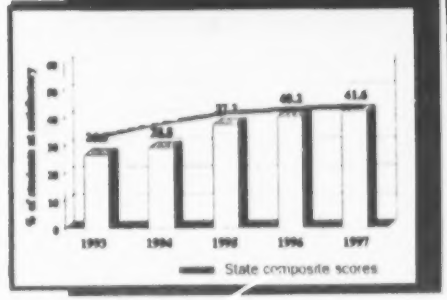
***For more information, contact the Delaware Department of Education at 302/739-6700.***

**Example 20**

# Allegany

| Functional Tests | | | Attendance Rate | | | MSPAP Composites | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Reading | 99.2 | (95) | Elem. | 95.8 | (94) | Grade 3 | 40.2 |
| Math | 92.7 | (80) | Sec. | 94.1 | (94) | Grade 5 | 44.1 |
| Writing | 95.0 | (90) | | | | Grade 8 | 40.6 |
| Citizenship | 93.8 | (85) | **Dropout Rate** | | | Total | 41.6 |

Numbers in parentheses represent state standards.




*For more information, contact the Maryland State Department's School and Community Outreach Office at [illegible].*

a state test? How can a child's performance become meaningful to a parent?

No matter what the title of the report in your state—an individual performance report, a home report or a parent report—to effectively translate how a child performed on a state assessment and make it meaningful, the Goals Panel recommends that states answer four questions on the individual student report:

- **Question I**: How did my child do?
- **Question II**: What types of skills or knowledge does his/her performance reflect?
- **Question III**: How did my child perform in comparison to other students in the school, district, state, and if available, the nation?
- **Question IV**: What can I do to help my child improve?

Determining how best to answer these questions and design a score report that clearly and helpfully communicates performance on the test requires listening to those who would be most interested in that information.

Following a strategy similar to Georgia's school profile report for parents (**Close-up II**), the Partnership for Learning in Washington State convened an informal meeting with parents to examine the individual score reports for the state's new assessment.

The lessons of the Partnership for Learning underscore the link between *informing* parents and *reporting* to parents. One of the conclusions that emerged from the informal meeting was that parents wanted context as well as the test scores. Before they could even begin to make sense of the data, parents wanted answers to a range of questions, including: Why did my child take this test? What are the standards? What did this test look like? What does it mean to "meet the standard"? Essentially, they wanted information that reflected some, if not all, of the recommendations outlined in Section II. For more of the lessons learned from the Partnership for Learning, see **Close-up VIII**.

## CLOSE-UP VIII:

## Reporting test scores so they make sense to parents—Lessons from Washington State (continued)

Washington State is moving toward a new system of testing that measures every 4th, 7th, and 10th grader against an important set of academic standards. Although test results will be used primarily for schoolwide accountability and instructional improvement, every student who takes the test—and his or her parent—also receives an individual report on performance. Fourth graders took these tests for the first time in spring 1997, and scores were released that fall.

Partnership for Learning, a non-profit, business-backed organization working to build greater public understanding of Washington State's new standards and tests, offered to convene an informal meeting with parents between the administration of the test and the release of the test scores to help determine the design and content of the individual report on performance. The goal was to give state officials insights about the score reports from the people who would be most interested in them.

As focus group members reviewed preliminary drafts of the test score reports and talked about the pros and cons of different ways of presenting the information, six important conclusions emerged:

1. Offer not only test scores but also context. Parents said the test score reports need to explain and put these new tests in context. Parents have a whole host of valid questions that need to be answered if they are to make sense of the data, including: Why did my child take this test? What are the standards? What does it mean to "meet the standard" on this test?

2. Use common, clear, consistent language. Parents want to make sense of the information from the tests, and they need clearly written language that avoids education jargon to do it. In particular, they told state officials to clearly communicate the exact skills and knowledge the tests measure (few parents know what "number sense," "algebraic sense," and "mathematics process" mean—but these words frequently crop up on state mathematics standards).

   Just as important, these new score reports contain new information. State officials were told that they needed to develop a common language and universal words for every piece of information on the forms (for example, parents did not want the state to let every individual school and community decide how it will refer to students who didn't meet the standards).

3. Stick to the word "standard." Parents said they understood the concept of a "standard" and they thought the word communicated well. They wanted to see how a student's performance compared to the standard—and thus they suggested that student performance should be described in relationship to (above, below, or at) the standard. They weren't in favor of pseudonyms for performance, such as "proficient," "novice," or "emerging," which don't clearly say how close the student is to the expected level of performance.

4. Don't expect consensus on how performance should be reported. A key issue on every criterion-referenced test is how many levels of student performance should be reported. Levels above "met the standard" give advanced students a chance to shine, and levels below give teachers and parents good information about how much work lies ahead for an individual student. In this area, parents don't offer consistent advice, and state officials can have endless debates about the pros and cons.

   Some parents said they believed gradations were important in learning more about individual student achievement, while others argued the only important point was whether or not a student met the standard. And while parents want reports to be clear and unmistakable about whether or not their child met the standard, they disagreed about how brutally honest to be. (For example, some parents didn't want the reports to mince words; they thought unambiguous phrases like "well below the standard" to describe the lowest-performing students communicated the message best.)

   The lesson here is that different parents have a range of responses to questions about how they want to learn about their child's performance. Certainly, state officials should check with parents in their state to see if particular suggestions consistently emerge. But rather than look for strong consensus—which may be impossible—state officials should strive to present testing information in a straightforward manner with clear explanations (this sort of presentation will communicate well with every parent).

5. Communicate what it means to meet (or exceed or fail) the standard. Parents need a reference point. At least in the early years of the new tests, a simple numeric score designating the standards and a "trust me" from the state may not be enough information. Parents asked what the numbers meant on the test score reports and how they were chosen. They wanted to correlate the difficulty and the content of the standard with the score their child received. Parents frequently noted, "I don't know what the standard is." To address their concerns, they wanted to see examples of test questions—precise examples of what it takes to meet the standard.

## CLOSE-UP VIII:

## Reporting test scores so they make sense to parents—Lessons from Washington State (continued)

- Give parents "actionable" information they can use to help their child improve. Parents wanted the score reports to give them very clear information about what and how well their child was learning. They looked for information that told them what their child did wrong—and for specific ideas about how to help their children improve. They liked score reports that organized student performance into two easy-to-read "strengths" and "weaknesses" columns (as opposed to organizing this information by content area). They also preferred efforts to make this information personalized and friendly.

In addition to these observations about the design of score reports, two other broad findings about test score information became apparent from the meeting:

✓ Parents like the idea of knowing how their child measures up against a standard, and they see the importance and usefulness of that information. But they still want to know how their child performs compared to other children. As they looked at preliminary drafts of the test score reports, they wanted assurances that this information also would be presented in the context of how well their child's classmates performed. They wanted this information for a simple reason: they felt it was important to know whether their child alone struggled to meet certain standards or whether the entire class struggled.

✓ Parents are familiar with score reports from traditional standardized tests such as the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills (CTBS). Over the years, these reports have evolved to provide specific information about a child's academic strengths and weaknesses in the skill and knowledge areas tested. For example, the reports can now tell parents a child's strengths—subtracting whole numbers—and a child's weaknesses—using correct verb tense. In comparison, many of the newer tests measuring standards—because of the scope of content measured—can't provide this degree of specificity. With all the attention and cost that has gone into developing new tests to measure clear standards, parents were surprised to learn that the information they got from these new tests might not give them as much detail about their child's learning as other, more traditional tests.

The score reports for new standards-based tests in Washington State now look very different from the original design. Within limitations of the form and the information the test actually yields, Washington State education officials ended up with a report that was much more useful to its intended parent audience.

*For more information, see* ***Section IV*** *or contact the Partnership for Learning at 206/625-9655 or visit their web site at www.partnership-wa.org.*



### Interpretation guides

One way to provide answers to the four questions listed on page 36 is to include an interpretation guide with the individual score report. This Idea Book is not advocating that interpretation guides take the place of informing parents *prior* to the administration of the state test about the need for higher standards, the changes in the state test, and so forth. Rather, it is suggested as a possibility because states might then be able to provide parents with all of the information they might want—such as definitions of achievement or performance levels, scoring guides, examples of student work, and ideas on how to help their child reach a higher level of learning. Such information probably would not fit on a single page.

Rhode Island, Washington, and Illinois are states that provide interpretation guides for parents. In Rhode Island's *Grade 4 Performance Assessment: Interpretation Guide for Families*, parents are provided with scoring guides for the math, health and writing assessments; examples of test questions; and student responses and analyses of those responses.

*Understanding Your Child's 4th Grade Test Scores: A Guide for Parents* comes from the Washington Commission on Student Learning, the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, the Washington State Parent Teacher Association, and the Partnership for Learning. It offers something similar to Rhode Island's guide. (Washington has recently released a new publication called *Reaching Higher: A Parent's Guide to the Washington Assessment of Student Learning*. This new report replaces *Understanding Your Child's 4th Grade Test Scores: A Guide for Parents*.)

Included in the section titled "Making Sense of the New Score Reports" are the following:

- a list of the Essential Academic Learning Requirements (Washington's state standards);
- a definition of what defines "good enough" on the tests;
- definitions of such terms as "number sense," "mathematical reasoning," and "mathematical connections";

Sylvia Soholt, Communications Director of the Edmonds School District in Washington State, tells the following story:

My daughter was born in Japan a couple of decades ago. When she was about six weeks old, I made my way by three trains to St. Luke's Hospital in Tokyo to see how she was progressing. The doctor we saw was quite old but still appeared amused and intrigued by each baby he held. He talked to my daughter gently as he slowly and deliberately inspected her. Then he returned her to me with a warmly reassuring smile, saying, "Your daughter is fine."

My son was born in Seattle a few years later. We left our initial visit to an efficient pediatrician with a booklet charting his weight and height. The percentile laden graphs told me that he weighed as much as 90 percent of babies in some norming group, although I wasn't quite sure whether this was a good thing or not.

Sylvia tells this story because she believes the same thing happens in testing—all the data in the world won't mean a whole lot if the parent doesn't know if the child did "okay."

- commonly asked questions about the test and answers; and
- sample test items.

### Answering the questions

Whether or not you include an interpretive guide with your individual student score report, answering the four questions listed on page 36 clearly and simply is a challenge. Parents want to be able to look at an individual report, quickly determine their child's performance, and understand what the information means in terms of the skills tested. They want to know whether their child did "okay," but they want a great deal of other information as well.

To answer the first three questions—How did my child do? What types of skills does his/her performance reflect? How did he/she do in comparison to other students in the school, district, and state?—clearly depends on the test the state has developed or uses. In some

## Example 21

**Student Name:**

**District:**
**School:**
**Grade:** 4

**Overall Performance: MODERATE**

**MICHIGAN EDUCATIONAL ASSESSMENT PROGRAM**

**ESSENTIAL SKILLS MATHEMATICS TEST**

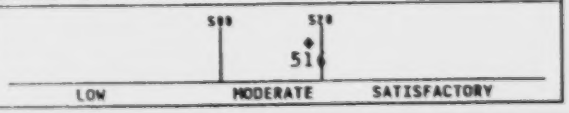
**OCTOBER 1996**

Your child recently took the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) Essential Skills Mathematics Test. The test measures whether a student has met important learning goals in mathematics. All MEAP tests report results in relation to a standard set by experienced educators. Any score that meets or exceeds the standard is SATISFACTORY. MEAP results are never reported in terms of how a child performed in comparison to other students.

Your child's score is shown as a diamond in the graph below. The diamond indicates how well your child did on the test overall. The total test score has been "Statistically Scaled" to allow score equivalence from year to year.

**I. OVERALL PERFORMANCE IN MATHEMATICS**

Score Range: 327-445
Number of Items: 92
Overall Performance:
MODERATE




What does this mean for my child?

SATISFACTORY: Your child understands important mathematical concepts and can select and apply mathematical operations presented in both number sentences and word problems. Although your child may have missed some test items, this score suggests that your child is well prepared for further study.

MODERATE: Your child's mathematical understanding is slightly below the test standard set for students at this grade level.

LOW: Your child is not well prepared in mathematics. This could be because your child has not had the opportunity to explore all of the ideas and skills tested, OR the manner in which those concepts and skills were taught has not been meaningful for your child, OR your child has not applied the continued attention, motivation and effort needed to achieve the test standard.

The Content subscores show relative strengths and weaknesses by eight topic areas. The Process subscores compare different ways of thinking about or doing mathematics. Any Content or Process score that is dramatically lower than the others suggests a need for additional work in that area. The test cannot diagnose specific ideas or procedures that are causing difficulty. Your child's teacher can provide more in-depth information about your child's daily work.

*For more information, contact the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) Office at 517/373-8393.*

cases, the state is examining performance on a set of clearly defined standards; in other cases, relative to a normative group; and still in others, relative to both a set of standards and a normative group.

In Michigan, students take the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) Essential Skills Tests. The example on the previous page presents some of the information a parent of a 4th grader who recently took the Essential Skills Mathematics Test would receive.

Through the use of explanatory language and graphics, parents can quickly grasp their child's overall performance, see how far that performance was from the "acceptable" level, and determine what their child's performance means in terms of skills and knowledge acquired.

Because Michigan's test examines performance solely against a set of standards, the report is quick to point out that the MEAP results do not report how a child performed in comparison to other students.

Colorado also measures performance against a set of standards. The *Student Performance Report* presented on the next page represents a 4th-grader's performance on the reading assessment. It clearly "checks" the levels of performance a child has mastered and provides a description of the skills and knowledge each level represents. As does Michigan's report, the Colorado *Student Performance Report* states that "the performance levels have been set by educators and other citizens. They reflect standards for what Coloradans think fourth graders should be able to do in Reading. They do not indicate how achievement of Colorado students compares with that of their peers in other parts of the United States or in other countries." In the example presented, the 4th-grader performed at the "proficient" level.

## Example 22

**CSAP**
COLORADO STUDENT ASSESSMENT PROGRAM

**Student Performance Report**

JACOB GOOD

Grade 4

**Purpose**
This report describes this student's achievement in terms of performance levels and content area standards

Simulated Data

Birthdate: 06/19/87
Special Codes:
A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T
2 5 6 9 3 4 9 0 2 9 2 4 9 5
Form/Level: A 4
Test Date: 03/10/98

School: KING ELEM
District: MOUNTAIN

City, State: SNOWY, CO

CTB McGraw-Hill



### Reading Performance Level

| Performance Levels | | Description |
|---|---|---|
| **4** Advanced | | Students, in a complete, abstract manner, sequence, recall detail, identify word meaning, categorize facts, evaluate main idea, identify problem and solution, interpret author's style, follow instructions, select appropriate references, interpret meaning of text, identify character traits/motives, identify details, classify vocabulary, and interpret poetry/folktales. Students can summarize, differentiate fact and opinion, use organizational features of a book, and apply reasoning skills. (Students in this performance level have scores of 562 and above.) |
| **3** Proficient | ✓ Score: 520 | Students understand directions, recognize author's point of view, explain reaction, define problem or solution, make predictions and draw conclusions, differentiate among printed materials, discriminate among various media, extract information from complex stimulus, identify characters reactions/motives, identify sequence, support opinion, classify familiar vocabulary, and interpret poetry in a concrete manner. (Students in this performance level have scores ranging from 496 to 561.) |
| **2** Partially Proficient | | Students use context clues to comprehend words, recall detail, skim to locate limited number of details, categorize facts, identify and use information in text, classify vocabulary in a basic way, and have a literal understanding of text. (Students in this performance level have scores ranging from 446 to 495.) |
| **1** Unsatisfactory | | Students have minimal/very general comprehension of a text that has substantial textual or visual support/clues, give inconsistent responses, have limited accuracy in the identification and use of facts, and have a limited, literal understanding of text. (Students in this performance level have scores of 444 and below.) |

### Explanation

In Spring 1998 Colorado fourth graders participated in a state-wide assessment of Reading and Writing. The student Performance Report presents the results for individual students. Reading performance is described in terms of four increasingly difficult levels, described in the boxes above.

The check mark indicates the performance level this student reached in Reading. This check mark indicates that this student can perform the majority of what is described for that level. The student may also be capable of performing some of the things described in the next higher level, but not enough to have reached that level of performance.

Look at the skills and knowledge described in the next higher level. These are the competencies this student needs to demonstrate to show academic growth.

The performance levels have been set by educators and other citizens. They reflect standards for what Coloradans think fourth graders should be able to do in reading. They do not indicate how achievement of Colorado students compares with that of their peers in other parts of the United States or in other countries.

Results for individual students are provided directly to school districts and they remain confidential. Summaries of school, district and state results are provided to the public. No information that would identify individual students is retained at the state level.

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*For more information, contact the Colorado Department of Education at 303/866-6664 or visit their web site at www.cde.state.co.us. Reproduced with permission of CTB/McGraw-Hill.*

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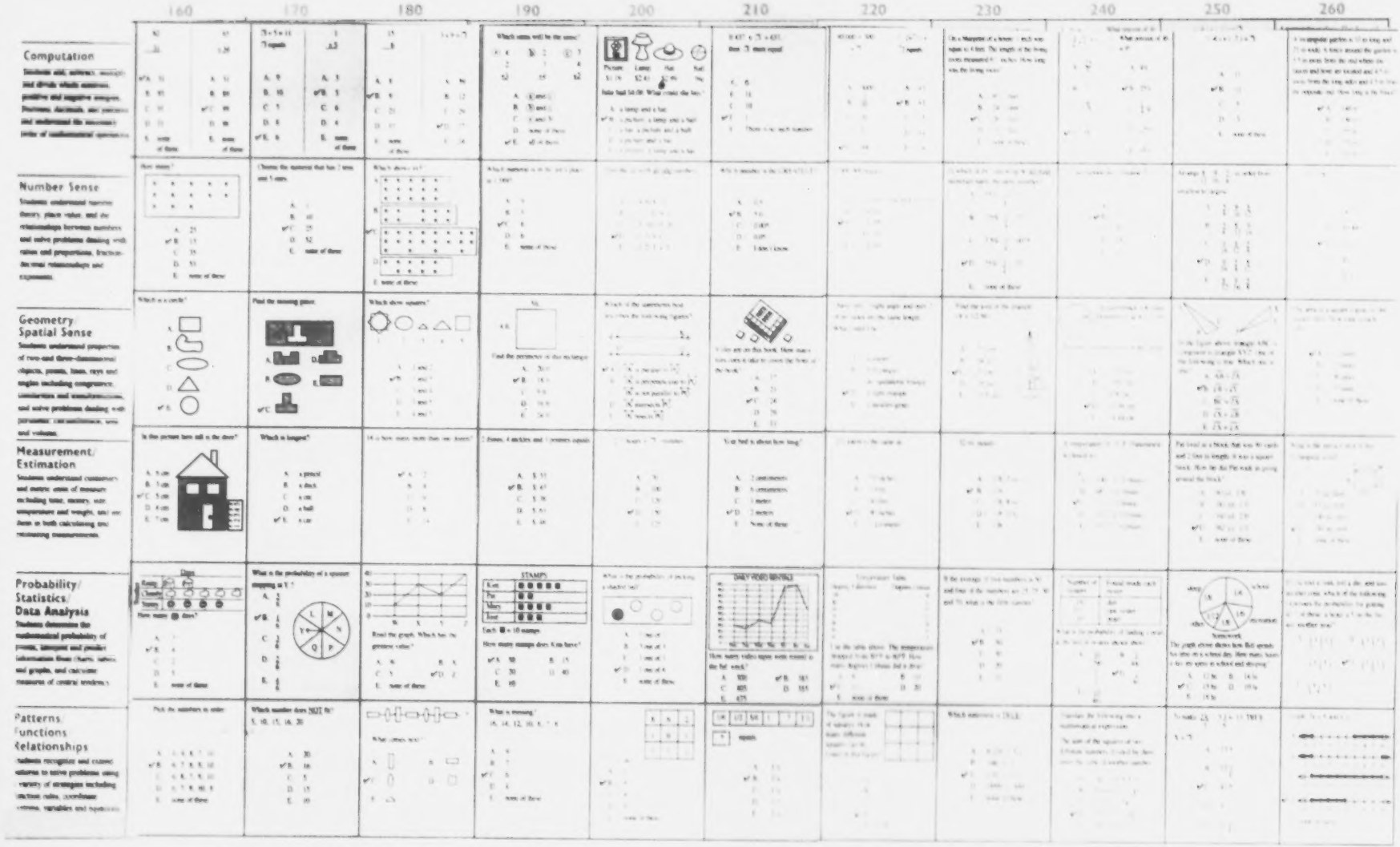
In the Edmonds, Washington, school district, the testing program includes a test called the Northwest Evaluation Association's Level Test, which is administered to students in grades 3 through 8. With the *Level Test Parent Report*, parents are provided with a chart that documents the kinds of test questions a child is likely to answer correctly and the kinds of test questions that will probably require new learning. Here's how it works:

- Parents are asked to find the score column closest to the child's score.
- Parents are then asked to read down the column for sample test items. The child's score suggests that he or she can get about half of the items in that particular column correct—the child is considered to be actively learning at that level.
- Parents are told to examine the items in the column(s) to the left. The child can likely get most of those correct.
- Items in the column(s) to the right probably require new learning.
- Over time, the chart allows parents to compare items the child could do in the past to those the child can do now.

For example, if a 4th grade student scored 219 on the Level Test in Mathematics, he or she can likely get most of the items correct in columns 160, 170, 180, 190, 200, and 210 (see Example 23 on the next page). In addition, he or she can likely get correct answers to half of the items which appear in column 220; columns 230, 240, 250 and 260 require new learning.

## Example 23

# Level Test Chart: Mathematics




*For more information, contact the Edmonds School District at 425/670-7137.*

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As with the assessment programs described on the previous pages, the Illinois Goal Assessment Program (IGAP) also measures student performance against a set of standards. In addition to an individual student score, the Individual Student Report also provides averages for the school, district, and state.

In the example below, parents of 8th grade students receive their child's score, as well as the school, district, and state scores. In addition, through the use of a bar chart, they are provided with an approximate range within which the middle half of the students in the school scored.

**Example 24**

# 1997 ILLINOIS GOAL ASSESSMENT PROGRAM

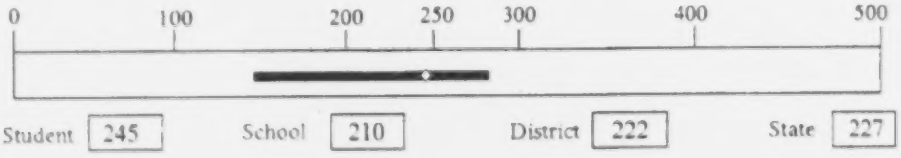
Grade: 8 CDS Code:
Student Name:
Birthdate: 04/14/83
School: MIDDLE SCHOOL
District: SCHOOL DIST

## Individual Student Report

This report summarizes your student's performance on the Illinois Goal Assessment Program (IGAP) tests taken during the second week of March 1997. These IGAP tests were administered in reading, mathematics, and writing at grades 3, 6, 8, and 10. Science and social sciences tests were administered at grades 4, 7, and 11. This report also summarizes data for your student's school and district and the state. The graphs and tables below show this information. Keep in mind that there is a margin of error associated with all test scores and that small score differences may be unimportant. If any section of this report contains an NA, it means that these IGAP scores are not available. This report is just for your information. Although you should feel free to contact your school about this report, you need not do so at this time.

### READING

This test uses two extended-length passages that represent the kinds of real-life reading situations students encounter in and out of school. One passage is a narrative (story-type) and one is an expository (information-type). On the reading test, your student scored 245. The school average was 210, and the district average was 222. For all students in the state, the average was 227. Your student's score is represented in the chart below by the diamond (◇). The black bar shows the approximate range within which the middle half of the students in the school scored. About one fourth of the students in the school scored below 145, and about one fourth of the students scored above 274. Scores in this school ranged from 1 to 500. The small boxes below the long box with the bar in it contain your student's score and the average student score for the school, the district, and the state.




*For more information, contact the Illinois State Board of Education at 217/782-4823.*

## National comparisons

As states have moved toward a system of standards-based assessments, the focus has been on student performance relative to those standards—whether the students are meeting the standard, exceeding the standard, or falling below the standard. Less attention has been paid to how students are doing compared to other students in the nation.

A growing number of states are beginning to realize that reporting performance against a "national percentile rank" is something with which many parents are comfortable; it represents a common form of reporting and criteria with which they are familiar. Although a percentile rank provides limited information and therefore has limited value in terms of what to change or improve, more states are considering such rankings as they configure their assessments. The result is that more assessments are providing both information against a set of standards as well as a national percentile rank.

Besides reporting performance against a national percentile rank, states may want to think about reporting state assessment performance along with another state or international assessment—such as reporting performance along with a state's National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) score or the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) score. In addition, these tests can serve as a tool to check the state's academic performance against a set of national standards (i.e., NAEP) or international standards (i.e., TIMSS).

Missouri recently did a study that linked their Grade 8 Mathematics Assessment to the TIMSS test. The data indicated a strong link between the two tests in regard to content. In a press release, the commissioner of education was quoted as saying, "success in math and science will be one of the keys to Missouri's economic competitiveness in the 21st century, so it is important for us to know how our students and schools are doing in these key subjects. The TIMSS give us a useful tool for checking progress and evaluating curriculum."

*For more information, contact the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education at 800/845-3545*

Missouri is one state that provides information on how a student performed against a set of standards, as well as how his or her performance compares to that of other students in the nation. In the example to the right, the *Missouri Assessment Program Student Report* allows parents of 4th graders to easily determine at which achievement level their child performed and what that level of performance represents. In addition, parents know how their child performed in comparison to other students across the nation.

*For more information, contact the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education at 800/843-3545.*



**Example 25**

## Mathematics

| Achievement Levels | Descriptions |
|---|---|
| **5** Advanced | Students use mental math and estimation; analyze data; create and generalize pictorial and numeric patterns; represent and explain mathematical relationships; apply geometric and spatial relationships involving measurement; apply concepts of lines, angles, congruence, symmetry and transformations; interpret Venn diagrams. MAP combined score range: above 691. |
| **4** Proficient | Students communicate math processes; add and subtract common fractions, and decimals (money only); use standard units of measurement; identify attributes of plane and solid figures; create and interpret data from graphs; recognize, extend, and describe pictorial or numeric patterns; apply strategies to solve multi-step and logic problems. MAP combined score range: 653 - 691. |
| **3** Nearing Proficiency | Students subtract and multiply whole numbers; identify evens, odds, ordinals and multiples; compare numbers; read analog and digital clocks; identify solid figures; compare information on a graph; identify equally likely events; extend a variety of patterns; begin to identify information in a Venn diagram. MAP combined score range: 614 - 652. |
| **2** Progressing | Students add whole numbers with regrouping; find a combination of coins that equals a given value; identify attributes of polygons; read thermometers; use information from graphs; identify most and/or least likely events; extend numeric patterns using addition; use given information to make logical decisions. MAP combined score range: 568 - 613. |
| **1** Step 1 | Students order whole numbers less than 100; identify congruent shapes; read simple tables and graphs; begin to identify and extend basic pictorial and/or numeric patterns. MAP combined score range: below 568. |

XXX

**TerraNova National Percentile: 64**

*TerraNova* is a multiple choice test. In Mathematics, your student scored better than 64 percent of the students in the nation.

Delaware also has configured its assessment system to provide information on achievement against the state standards, as well as against a norming group. In the example below, parents can compare an individual student's score with the Delaware Content Standards to the scores of the school, district, and state; they can also compare their child's results against those of students throughout the country through the use of a national sample. For example, the student scored 452 out of a possible 700 points on the reading portion of the test. The average school score was 440; the average district score was 444; and the average state score was 430. In addition, the student scored in the 85th percentile.

It is important to remember that if comparisons are not easily represented on the individual report (because of space or other constraints)—whether they are comparisons against state standards or against a norming group—parents should be told where they can go for this information.

**Answering question four: Helping parents to help their-child improve**

Providing parents with clear information on how their child performed, what the performance actually means, and appropriate comparisons is only part of the picture. Parents also want to better understand what they can do with their children to help improve their performance.

*Negotiating with the test provider*

What kind of information and how much or how little is provided to parents depends largely on the type of contract that is negotiated with the test provider. In Delaware, the state testing staff designed the score reports before finalizing any negotiations. This allowed the staff to explore the implications of various kinds of scores, using narrative statements (as opposed to sub-scores), and reporting in a variety of categories. They discovered that involving parents early in the process is key, so that the design is understood and accepted. For more information on how Delaware negotiated with its test provider, see **Close-up IX**.

**Example 26**

**Score Comparisons**

| | Reading | Writing |
|---|---|---|
| Student | 200 - - - - - - **452** - - - - - 700 | 3 - - - - - - - - - **11** - - - - - 15 |
| School | 200 - - - - - **440** - - - - - - 700 | 3 - - - - - - - - - **10** - - - - - - 15 |
| District | 200 - - - - - **444** - - - - - 700 | 3 - - - - - - - - - **10** - - - - - - 15 |
| State | 200 - - - - **430** - - - - - - - 700 | 3 - - - - - - - - - **10** - - - - - - 15 |

Certain items on the reading part of the test came from a national sample. The percentile below represents how your child performed on those items compared to students from a national sample:

1% - - - - - - - - -

## CLOSE-UP IX:

### Negotiating with the test provider—Lessons from Delaware

Delaware recently had a problem that a great many state testing programs face: the state needed to persuade a testing vendor to help design a fairly complex program within an extremely short timeline. In addition, because the state lacked the staff to deal with every nuance of the program, it needed a way of communicating with the vendor that would result in a clear understanding of what the state expected of the vendor and what the vendor could expect of staff. In other words, Delaware needed a way for both the state and the vendor to adjudicate decisions quickly and easily to facilitate a difficult process.

Delaware began its negotiations with the vendor with two simple ideas in mind:

1. Always begin with the end in sight;

2. Create a list of clear and explicit rules at the beginning of the process, indicate that the rules exist, and be sure to enforce them.

Delaware carried out these ideas by doing the following:

1. The state included a section titled "Needs" in its Request for Proposal. The section was specifically designed to articulate the criteria for the project and the major underlying assumptions driving the work. The state made it clear that the vendors had some flexibility in preparing their proposals so long as they agreed to work within those criteria.

2. Delaware defined "the big picture," believing that it was important to make current decisions in line with larger long-term goals and important for the vendor to do the same to ensure that the decisions would be consistent over time. In addition, Delaware staff believed that keeping the big picture in mind at decision time would increase the odds that the long-term plan would actually come to fruition.

3. Finally, Delaware encapsulated the "Needs" section and its idea of the big picture into a score report design. The state sought a simple means to communicate both its needs and the big picture, and the score report—the piece that would end up defining the testing program for the most students and parents—seemed the best way to do so. Staff worked with teachers and parents to create a design that each party was comfortable with. Policymakers were also involved from the beginning so that they could better understand what the end result would look like and what it could be used for. Not only has this proved helpful in defining the program for the state and for the vendor, it also increased that state's ability to communicate with the public in a concrete and meaningful way.

While relatively simple, these ideas enabled Delaware to articulate clearly what it needed from a testing vendor while providing it with a significant amount of flexibility in making its proposals. Each of the major testing vendors submitted a bid, giving the state the ability to select from several it believed best matched its criteria. Helping the vendor see clearly where the state wanted to end up made it easier for the vendor to offer its service—meaning that it led to their willingness to bid and Delaware's ability to choose the bid that best reflected its criteria.

*For more information, contact the Delaware Department of Education, Assessment and Analysis Division, at 302/739-6700.*

***Interpretation***

In some cases, the information provided to parents on how to help their child improve needs to be viewed through an "interpretive lens." In others, the interpretation is already provided, and parents are left with a list of action steps to guide them as they help their child refine academic skills.

*The Connecticut Mastery Testing Program Grade 8 Parent/Student Diagnostic Report in Mathematics* is an example of a report that requires interpretation. The report lists the 40 objectives tested on the assessment in five general areas. For each objective, the report indicates how many items were needed to be answered correctly to "master" the area and how many the student actually answered correctly.

**Example 27**

| Algebra | Mastery Criteria | Student Score |
|---|---|---|
| 37. Solve equations involving 1 step | 3 of 4 | 2 |
| 38. Use order of operations | 3 of 4 | 3 |
| 39. Use formulas to evaluate expressions | 3 of 4 | 4 |
| 40. Represent situations with algebraic expressions | 3 of 4 | 4 |

*For more information, contact the Connecticut Department of Education at 860/566-2201 or visit their web site at www.state.ct.us/sde.*

In the algebra area example above, a parent would be able to interpret the following strengths and weaknesses of this particular 8th grader:

- He/she was able to use the "order of operations" correctly, use formulas to evaluate expressions, and represent situations using algebraic expressions; but
- He/she had some problems solving equations involving one step.

Oklahoma uses a similar approach. In the *Grade 5 Parent Report*, Priority Academic Student Skills are listed for all the areas tested, together with the number of questions asked in each area and the number correct. In addition, parents are provided with an Oklahoma Performance Index (OPI) score that indicates whether the student achieved a satisfactory level of performance. Students who achieve an OPI score of 70 or greater in a subject area have demonstrated satisfactory performance in that subject area.

In the example below, which measures a 5th grader's knowledge of various areas of U.S. history and civics, parents can quickly determine whether or not their child achieved a satisfactory score on the test with an easy to understand "yes" or "no." In this example, the parent can conclude that the child had difficulty in locating and describing the states, major climate regions, landforms, and bodies of water, as well as in interpreting various pictorial sources of information.

**Example 28**

**Priority Academic Skills**
**History/Constitution/Government** **Satisfactory OPI score of 70 achieved? YES**

| | # of Questions | # Correct |
|---|---|---|
| Locate and describe the states, major climate regions, landforms and bodies of water. | 5 | 3 |
| Identify major events of the Revolutionary War period. | 5 | 5 |
| Identify the causes and effects of the Civil War. | 5 | 4 |
| Identify the reasons for writing the Declaration of Independence and Constitution. | 5 | 5 |
| Identify the rights and responsibilities of citizens in a democratic society and a free enterprise system. | 5 | 5 |
| Identify information using encyclopedias, almanac, atlases, dictionaries and literature. | 5 | 5 |
| Interpret various pictorial sources of information such as maps, graphs, charts, globes, pictures and cartoons. | 5 | 2 |

*For more information, contact the Oklahoma Department of Education at 405/521-3341 or visit their web site at sde.state.ok.us.*

Delaware is one state that essentially does the interpretation for the parent by listing the student's instructional needs (based on his or her performance on the assessment) directly below the student's scores. The following example of an *English Language Arts Individual Report* provides ideas for what a 3rd grade child should work on to achieve a higher level in reading and writing:

**Example 29**

**Instructional Needs**

| To achieve a higher level in READING, your child should work on: | To achieve a higher level in WRITING, your child should work on: |
|---|---|
| • Using information to make reasonable interpretations<br>• Drawing conclusions based on information in the text<br>• Connecting and synthesizing information into a clear interpretation within and across texts, ideas, and concepts<br>• Formulating, expressing, and supporting opinions<br>• Making and supporting inferences about contents, events, characters, setting, theme, and style | • Using effective and varied introductions and closings<br>• Writing in a consistent style with precise, vivid word choice<br>• Writing with a clear logical progression of ideas using smooth transitions<br>• Responding directly to the prompt |

*For more information, contact the Delaware Department of Education at 302/739-6700 or visit their web site at www.doe.state.de.us*

It is important to remember that providing this type of information may not be enough; in fact, it may give rise to additional questions among parents. They may be confused if their child's class work indicates adequate performance, but the statewide assessment results reflect serious weaknesses. Parents need to know where they can go to get the answers to their questions. Research shows that nearly 9 out of 10 parents rely heavily on teachers as a source of information about education.[10] Therefore, states should encourage parents to contact their child's teachers to get a better sense of the child's level of achievement and the kinds of tasks they can be doing with their child to help him or her improve. Delaware provides this encouragement by stating the following at the bottom of each child's score report:

> Please see your child's teacher for more information about achievement in reading and writing.

Michigan offers parents questions that they should ask school staff. On the *4th Grade Essential Skills Mathematics Test Report*, parents are provided with the following:

**Example 30**

**What should I ask the school staff?**

- Does the district mathematics program include the state's Core Curriculum objectives?
- Is enough time spent on mathematics instruction?
- Are teachers using manipulatives, calculators, and different problem-solving strategies to help students build understanding?
- Are students learning to use mental arithmetic and estimation as well as traditional paper and pencil computation?
- Does my child participate fully in mathematics class by arriving prepared, paying attention, completing assignments, and asking questions when my child does not understand an idea?

*For more information, contact the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) office at 517/373-8893.*



On the *Rhode Island Mathematics Performance Assessment Individual Student Report*, parents are quickly reminded that one test cannot represent all of a child's knowledge and skills:

**Example 31**

Your child's answers provide information about his/her understanding of mathematics and show how well your child can apply mathematics to real life situations. Answers also provide a way to measure mathematics problem solving, communication, and reasoning skills. The results do not represent all of your child's knowledge and skills in these areas. These results, taken with results from other tests such as the multiple choice Metropolitan Achievement Tests (MAT), and daily classroom work, provide a more complete picture of your child's mathematical skills.

*For more information, contact the State of Rhode Island Department of Education at 401/222-2031.*

Encouraging parents to ask teachers questions doesn't just have to appear on student reports. On the back of its *Testing, Testing, Testing* brochure, the Partnership for Learning encourages parents to look at the "bigger picture" and to recognize that looking at information from a variety of tests and assessment tools remains the best way to see how well individual students are learning.

## SECTION IV:

## "Making Things Work" at the State Level

Parents want to understand why their children are being held to higher standards. They want to be informed about the changes that are taking place in the state test, and they want to know what their child's scores mean and what they can do to help their child improve. Parents want to understand how the results will be used and whether there are "high-stakes" consequences attached to those results, such as decisions about promotion or graduation. Parents are eager for more information, presented in clear language that they can easily understand.

Unfortunately, states do not typically inform parents about these changes, nor do they report test results in terms parents understand and know how to use. On the whole, states have invested much more of their efforts and resources in testing students than in informing and reporting the results to parents and students.



The following are examples of state agencies and non-government organizations committed to clear communication with parents. Many have used some or all of the recommendations included in **Sections II** and **III** to help improve their communication efforts. They use polls and focus groups to understand the concerns of their community, they clarify what they expect of students and provide accurate information about the extent to which those expectations are being met, they provide action steps that parents can take with their own children to help them learn and improve—but they vary in their specific approaches. They have different structures, they have created unique partnerships and coalitions, and their coordination efforts are not alike. But there are at least two similarities among all of them: these agencies and organizations have made communication central to their reform and improvement efforts, and they have built the capacity to communicate. Their improved communication efforts have begun to create a better informed public that will demand more and support schools in reaching the academic goals set for them. They are "making things work."

## How Delaware Is Making Things Work

The impetus in Delaware for doing a better job of communicating with parents probably aligns nicely with most other state education agencies: parents deserve to understand how their son or daughter is progressing and so we need to work hard to make sure they have that understanding. But it also involves something more; a recent "back page" article in Education Week suggested what most educators have long understood: that a child's achievement can be heavily dependent on factors external to the classroom. For educators this should be seen as a challenge to be addressed, and it can only be addressed through a clear, coherent message.

To create this message we have tried hard to listen to parents. We've used them in the design of our communication materials, most specifically in the design of the score reports that will indicate to them how their children performed. One of the things they said over and over again was "please tell us what our children need to do in order to do better." We listened and the score report is that much improved as a result. But it doesn't end there. Constant contact with the state's parent organizations, presentations to PTA/PTO meetings, and participation in their conferences helped us work towards the ideal of a clear and coherent message, and we continue to do more.

Internally, we have initiated some relatively simple "programs" to help each of us say the same things when we present the testing program. For example, a set of overheads has been distributed to each person who presents the state testing program, along with instructions and training as to how to use them. All presenters are free to supplement the core presentation with information they find helpful so long as the core remains intact. The result is that each of us is saying the same thing.

Other means of ensuring a consistent message that have been or will be used include brochures, an effective media strategy, interpretive guides to the score reports written for parents, etc. We are working hard to create a coherent system by planning each piece within the larger context of when parents will need information so that our effort at communicating has the highest possible chance for success.

Perhaps our most challenging communications effort is yet to come. Next fall, prior to the release of the proficiency levels on our state test that will drive our state's accountability system, we will conduct public meetings and focus groups for the purpose of validating the cut points on the test. For example, one of the things we hope to do is to show the public what the cut point looks like on the reading test that will determine promotion, and then ask whether or not parents and other constituents support the cut point as set. Our intent is to make the cuts as explicit as possible with the expectation that the reaction will be to immediately form a team of parent, child and teacher that can work together in improving the student's achievement. Again, only with a clear, coherent message will that be possible.

*For more information, contact John Tanner, Director, Assessment and Analysis, 302/739-6700.*

## How Maryland Is Making Things Work

Like the rest of the nation, Maryland learned very early that the task of reforming its schools was going to be an ongoing effort, multi-layered and devoid of quick fixes, with no easy, off-the-shelf remedies. Communications with parents and the public have similarly proved challenging as education tops the public's list of priorities. Whereas the Maryland State Department of Education previously had 24 principal customers (i.e., 24 local school system staffs), it suddenly seemed that four million citizens wanted to be part of school reform. Maryland realized that good policy had to be a constant and that communications must be continuous and dynamic, ever-improving, and clearly in tune with the shifting sands of public opinion.

The current wave of school reforms in Maryland began with the release of the Maryland School Performance Report in November 1990. A brief press release guided media through their first foray into education accountability. A sparse 50-page booklet of numbers reported for the first time how school systems and the state performed on attendance, dropout, and basic skills graduation tests—with checks to designate when state standards were met. While much of the public yawned, the media grappled to understand the numbers.

By 1993, the media were becoming more savvy, and the public asked why new state criterion-referenced tests in grades 3, 5, and 8 showed that no more than a third of these students were passing. The public was baffled when traditional multiple-choice, norm-referenced tests were replaced with tests where students occasionally worked in groups and solved problems, then explained their answers. Student performance assessments and the standards were incomprehensible, and parents wanted to know about technical assessment and instructional details that had previously been "insider stuff." If reforms were to move forward, the language of reform would need to change, and the volume of information crafted for the public would need to increase dramatically.

Early on, public sentiment was gauged through analysis of newspaper clips from the state's more than 200 large- and small-market newspapers. Liberal urban centers such as Baltimore and the Washington-Baltimore suburbs differed dramatically from more rural, conservative jurisdictions. Public meetings and dialogues with legislators and education stakeholders helped clarify which messages were resonating with public groups and which ones were not. The critical nature of clear and understandable descriptions of tests, report card data, and reform strategies such as sanctions and rewards started to become clear.

National polls, such as the series of Public Agenda reports, have helped guide Maryland's decision to shift the focus of communications to principals and teachers. The Department of Education has maintained a steady stream of information on reforms, packaged in language that is clear to both the public and educators. Teachers and principals are key to communications because they oversee that important interface between education policy and children and families. Their knowledge and experience become the real messages to parents.

Principals began receiving biweekly bulletins from the Department, and a publication for teachers, initially called Maryland Education Connections, was developed and piloted, eventually becoming *Maryland Classroom*. The four-page tabloid has become a mainstay of communications with teachers, focusing on information, success stories, and the most current news stories on reforms.

A 1994 survey by the Education Commission of the States helped for the first time to gauge the opinions of Maryland parents with those of parents from several other education reform states. The poll helped validate national polls that warned of a public impatient for accountability from their schools and angry when reforms seemed to stray from academics and the basics.

Among the communications products that emerged was a 30-page handbook for parents on the state's testing program for grades 3, 5, and 8—Maryland School Performance Assessment Program (MSPAP). In the first year of its publication, the handbook was well received by teachers and parents alike. However, it became clear that parents wanted to know how the day-to-day lives of their children would be better, how they would be challenged. Consequently, the Parent Handbook on MSPAP was revised in its second year to become the *Parent Handbook for Better Schools*, outlining how school reform meant better teaching and learning and how MSPAP fit into that effort. Distributed initially to parents in the tested grades only, the publication was more recently sent to all parents in grades 1 through 8. A tear-off request form for more information, a toll-free phone line, and a web address listed in the booklet allows parents to access even more information. The web site, which registers more than 85,000 hits per month, shows the MSPAP information portion to be among the most popular features for users.

The Department has produced a series of one-page fact sheets in question-and-answer format and in clear language on nearly 40 topics. Three of those fact sheets describe what students experience as they sit down to take MSPAP. A series of posters also helps parents see samples of student responses to portions of MSPAP assessment tasks and a list of the basic skills and applications necessary to do well on each test item. Principals are encouraged to distribute the posters during parent conferences in which teachers and parents can talk about the expectations for higher student performance with concrete examples in hand.

Videos and other materials have been distributed to principals as well as a communications resource binder to encourage a year-long stream of clear and understandable information on testing. Principals periodically receive copies of camera-ready newsletter columns from the State Superintendent that help keep parents up to date

## How Maryland Is Making Things Work (continued)

on reforms. These efforts seem to have helped ease a worrisome trickle of misinformation and myths propagated by opposition groups.

With the MSPAP experience in mind, Maryland has been working several years on a new set of high school graduation tests that will begin affecting the high school class of 2004 as those students enter grade 9 in the fall of 2000. A statewide task force developed the framework and the core learning goals for the tests over two years. Focus groups and polls of parents, teachers, and principals revealed the high level of support for higher expectations as well as worries over the details of implementation. Town meetings across the state conducted jointly by the Department and by the test designers aided the State Board of Education and State Superintendent Nancy S. Grasmick in developing a phase-in plan for the tests that responded to the concerns voiced by parents and educators that the tests would be too much too fast and that too many students would fail.

An extensive community effort by the Maryland Business Roundtable for Education has taken the messages on the new tests to the business community while student brochures and videos are on their way to middle schools to prepare students and their families for the new academic focus anticipated in Maryland high schools. The *Maryland Classroom* and other communication tools continue a steady stream of information to schools, while newsletter columns are distributed to school principals, Parent Teacher Association groups, and education stakeholders, outlining the most current developments with the new tests. Staff from the Department and from the Business Roundtable have spoken to hundreds of business groups, faculties, PTA groups, and other interested stakeholders. Recently, the Department has developed a dynamic display booth that operates at conferences and fairs across the state to disseminate materials and build awareness of reforms.

The complex demands for information and public engagement will only increase as Maryland continues its work on improving schools. Success will depend on ensuring that the public does not lose patience with education reformers as Maryland works its way through a gauntlet of issues to improve schools. The state believes that public involvement and engagement will be absolutely critical if taxpayers are expected to pay the bill for better schools.

*For more information, contact Ron Peiffer, Assistant State Superintendent, at 410/767-0473.*

## How the Massachusetts Coalition for Higher Standards Is Making Things Work

The Massachusetts Coalition for Higher Standards was organized in the spring of 1997 to help communities in Massachusetts respond successfully to the primary challenge of the Education Reform Act of 1993—raising student achievement through new rigorous academic standards and "high stakes" tests.

Recognizing that high failure rates on statewide tests in other states led to watered-down standards or elimination of high-stakes tests, the Coalition for Higher Standards has united local school and community leaders, educators, and parents to bolster the efforts required to raise standards. The Coalition's grass-roots efforts engage 16 school districts and two regional collaboratives (representing a total of 47 districts across the state) in outreach programs and targeted school improvement initiatives.

The Coalition works toward three primary goals:

- ***Developing local and statewide communications and outreach projects,*** including building support among parents and the public for high academic standards and organizing community efforts to raise student and school achievement.
- ***Building school capacity*** by developing joint projects among Coalition district schools and sharing best practices that increase school capacity to raise student achievement by using the statewide standards and tests.
- ***Supporting effective state implementation*** by communicating information from the field with the Department of Education and state policymakers to ensure the most effective implementation of the statewide standards and tests.

Three principles guide coalition efforts:

- **Education is a local issue.** Send out a statewide message on the need for education reform and the public assumes you are talking about other people's—and probably urban—schools. To alert people to the value of education reform in their schools, outreach efforts must operate on a local level.
- **Parents listen to their children's teachers.** The best way to build parental support for the academic standards and testing is to have their children's teachers explain the value of the program.
- **An independent group has more credibility.** By operating independently of the Department of Education (DOE), the coalition is able to make statements and push for action that the DOE cannot.

### Information and Materials

During its first year of operation, the Coalition focused its efforts on building awareness of the state's standards and testing program. Two Coalition **information brochures**—the spring and fall issues of *Starting Now*—were distributed statewide to broad audiences. The spring issues—which provided an overview of the state's standards and testing program and built realistic expectations for first-year results—reached 250,000 parents, teachers, and community members through school and business mailings; 50,000 copies were printed in Spanish. The fall issue—which featured the student Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) report and addressed the meaning and context of first-year results—was sent to parents of the 950,000 public school students in the state; a total of 1.2 million copies were printed. The Department of Education funded the printing and distribution of the *Starting Now* brochures.

The Coalition has also produced a larger **information packet** and periodic fliers, provided **editorial briefings** to statewide and local newspapers, produced **op-eds**, and publishes a **monthly update**—all focused on building awareness of the key points of the statewide standards and testing program.

### Local Leadership Groups

Working on a more local level, the Coalition established local leadership groups of parents, teachers, and community leaders who have committed to making student achievement a significant and ongoing community project. With information, materials, and organizational support from the Coalition, the groups undertake special projects, such as forums to introduce community members to the sample test questions, presentations on the standards and tests to parents on a school-by-school basis, and other projects.

The Coalition has shown success at **refocusing the efforts and messages of existing groups** on raising student achievement. Sometimes this involves partnering with local organizations to present a single, unified message about higher expectations and academic standards and tests. Working with the Black Ministerial Alliance and 14 other Boston organizations, for instance, the Coalition helped coordinate a Boston citywide forum, attended by 400 parents (largely from minority communities), on the MCAS tests. In other cases, the Coalition provides short briefings at scheduled meetings of local organizations and **talking points** to groups for communications with the press or broader public.

### Feedback and Evaluations

The Coalition regularly monitors parental and public concerns and attitudes through **annual public opinion surveys**, questions raised at Coalition-sponsored forums, **internal focus groups**, **reviews of statewide and local media coverage**, and telephone calls received from parents and the public. The Coalition updates its regular information packet (available to parents, businesses, the media, and the other community members) according to the feedback received.

## How the Massachusetts Coalition for Higher Standards Is Making Things Work (continued)

The Coalition will measure the success of its efforts to increase awareness and understanding of the statewide standards and tests. The Coalition expects public opinion research to show that increasing percentages of the public are aware of and supportive of the statewide standards and tests. Press coverage indicating greater understanding of the technical issues of standards and testing and supporting the value of raised expectations and higher academic standards will also indicate Coalition success.

**Measurable Goals and School Improvement Plans**

The other measure of success, of course, is the extent to which change is taking place in the schools. The Coalition's success, then, will be evident as greater numbers of school improvement plans incorporate measurable goals with a focus on improved student achievement. The Coalition works with school site councils (which unite parents, teachers, and the principal in determining school improvement plans) to help them set clear and measurable goals for student improvement. The Coalition helped schools realign their business and community partnerships to focus on programs critical to making substantial gains in student achievement.

The Coalition is managed by the Mass Insight Education and Research Institute (MERI), an independent non-profit organization focused on improving Massachusetts' public schools. MERI also produces special issue reports and runs ongoing leadership groups and statewide briefings to support the implementation of the Education Reform Act of 1993.

**Coalition members include:** Boston, Concord-Carlisle, Gloucester, Greenfield, Marblehead, Milton, Needham, Newton, Quincy, Rockport, Salem, Springfield, Taunton, Uxbridge, Watertown, and Woburn, the Pioneer Valley Regional Education and Business Alliance (REBA), and the EDCO Collaborative of Greater Boston.

**The Coalition receives financial support from:** the Coalition communities and the state, along with BankBoston, The Boston Foundation, Goodwin, Procter & Hoar, Gorton's Seafoods, Hewlett-Packard, IBM, Jessie B. Cox Charitable Trust, Liberty Mutual Group, Microsoft, New England Financial, and State Street Bank and Trust Company.

*For more information, contact Bill Guenther, President, Mass Insight Education and Research Institute, at 617/492-0580 or at insight@massinsight.com*

## How the Partnership for Learning (Washington State) Is Making Things Work

### Purpose and Goals

Partnership for Learning has a single-minded goal: to build public awareness and sustain political support for Washington State's new academic standards and school improvement effort. Its efforts are supported by the contributions of more than 50 businesses and community foundations statewide.

The Partnership's communication and outreach activities reflect these messages:

- the importance of high and clear academic standards for students;
- the rigor of new state tests measuring the standards;
- how the new standards and tests are improving schools and student achievement;
- the broad, statewide support—especially among businesses—for the new standards and tests.

The cornerstone of Washington State's efforts to improve public schools and raise student achievement has been the 1993 School Improvement Act. That act set in motion a process to develop higher and clearer standards for what students should be learning, tests to measure progress against the standards, and accountability requirements that ask students and schools to work hard at meeting these expectations.

Business and community leaders created the Partnership for Learning in late 1994 because they believed that any attempt to change schools needed broad public awareness and understanding to succeed; they wanted to ensure the state (and elected officials) "stayed the course" over the effort's long implementation timeline.

The Partnership was created as a short-term but powerful effort to ensure the success of the school improvement effort. Once the effort is well underway (when "school reform" becomes the regular way schools function and the "new standards" are no longer new), the Partnership will complete its efforts—probably within the next 5-10 years.

### What's Working: Outreach and Coalitions

Partnership for Learning's communication strategy is specific and focused: to build understanding of school reform among individuals with the greatest impact on what happens in schools—community leaders, parents, and educators. This clearly focused mission and workplan is the key to the Partnership's success. The organization is not distracted by other issues, and decisions about how resources are used are strategic (for example: How does a proposed project effectively communicate with our target audiences?).

Partnership for Learning uses the following channels to inform and improve its work:

- A **Working Committee** (composed of key business leaders, lobbyists, and communications specialists) meets regularly to provide ongoing direction and advice for the Partnership's work. Committee members have the expertise to identify emerging controversies related to the standards and tests, to provide marketing and public relations advice, and to offer strategic direction to the Partnership's workplan.
- The Partnership conducts **regular public opinion research** that tracks what Washington citizens think about education, the new standards, testing, and school accountability. The research results help the Partnership identify communication themes and issues with low public understanding or support.
- A **network of community, business, and education leaders in eight cities** helps the Partnership identify local communication needs and projects. These local advisors (in Bellingham, Everett, Olympia, Spokane, Tacoma, the Tri-Cities area, Vancouver, and Yakima) help ensure that Partnership publications, events, and projects are relevant, timely, and effective in each area of the state.
- **Informal focus groups** are used to review Partnership publications—ensuring that these publications address real concerns and are presented with the right level of detail.
- The Partnership is working to **use community agencies and organizations** to distribute information and Partnership materials. Rather than trying to reproduce local expertise and contacts, the Partnership increasingly is asking local organizations—churches, service clubs, agencies serving families—to help distribute information.
- Finally, the Partnership maintains a **close working relationship with the state agencies** responsible for the new standards and tests: the Commission on Student Learning and the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction. All the organizations work together to ensure themes and messages are consistent and that their efforts reinforce (and don't duplicate) each other's.

The ultimate measure of the Partnership's success has been the steady progress that Washington State has made. Despite sweeping political changes since the law was enacted in 1993, the legislation and strategy have stayed in place, the state has maintained its funding support, and school districts and schools are beginning to orient their efforts to helping students reach higher standards.

While the Partnership alone can't take credit for these successes, its existence has helped state and local leaders stay focused and has demonstrated the business community's serious commitment to this issue.

## How the Partnership for Learning (Washington State) Is Making Things Work (continued)

**Activities and Products**

Partnership for Learning's communication activities fall into two categories: broad-public information efforts (top-down) and grass-roots and community outreach (bottom-up). Specific activities include:

***Public Information***

- Regular newsletters/updates to 25,000 citizens
- Reports/guides on the new standards and tests
- Targeted advertising
- Earned media and op-eds
- Ready-to-use materials for schools

***Community Outreach***

- Community events and workshops
- Statewide speakers' bureau
- Trained, engaged cadres of local activists
- Tools/support for community action

Partnership publications include:

- **Testing, Testing, Testing...**—comparing the new state tests with the more traditional tests and explaining what information parents and teachers will get from the new tests.
- **A Parent's Guide to Your Child's Academic Success**—providing an in-depth overview of the new standards and tests and suggestions for how parents can help their child meet the new standards.
- **A Businessperson's Guide to Washington's School Improvement Strategy**—showing businesspeople (from top executives to front-line employees) how they can ensure that their efforts to work with schools are effective.
- **Help Your Child Succeed in School and Anything Is Possible**—offering quick information (flyer format) about standards and tests in five languages: Spanish, Russian, Vietnamese, Cambodian, and English.
- **Understanding the New 4th- and 7th-Grade Tests**—explaining the new state tests and how they are scored (co-produced with Washington State's Commission on Student Learning).

The Partnership also widely distributes copies of Washington's new standards and sample test questions and produces ready-to-use newsletter articles for schools and parent organization. To better reach parents, the Partnership also has co-sponsored several publications with the Washington State Parent-Teacher Association.

Partnership for Learning serves as a credible, non-government source of information about Washington's school improvement effort for citizens throughout the state. All publications and events produced by the Partnership are free of charge.

*For more information, contact Bill Porter, Executive Director, at 206/625-9655 or at bill@partnership-wa.org.*

## How the Prichard Committee (Kentucky) Is Making Things Work

### What is the Prichard Committee?

The Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence is a non-profit, non-partisan group of 96 volunteer citizens dedicated to improving education in Kentucky at all levels. It was originally appointed in 1980 to study higher education but became independent of government and broadened its scope to include elementary and secondary education in 1983. This independence allows it to speak out as a voice for citizens and parents, an element critical to its effectiveness.

### Mission and Goals

The mission of the Prichard Committee is to provide a public voice advocating for vastly improved education for all Kentuckians. Its goals are to:

- speak out to see that progress in education is made;
- recommend solutions to problems;
- inform the public, legislators, governors, and education officials; and
- stimulate and work with local parents and citizens.

### What Has Worked?

In 1984, the Committee held a statewide town forum to listen to public sentiment about education. Volunteers were recruited to organize local meetings through PTAs, the League of Women Voters, chambers of commerce, school districts, community colleges, and universities. A major business conducted a statewide ad campaign to encourage attendance. Kentucky Educational Television connected the 145 community meetings. More than 20,000 citizens and parents gathered to talk about education, sending a resounding message to state policymakers—Kentucky citizens wanted better schools.

With the passage of the Kentucky's comprehensive, standards-based education reform in 1990, the Prichard Committee's role changed from advocating for legislation and funding to advocating for implementation of the new law. Recognizing that misinformation could easily sidetrack meaningful school reform, the Committee refocused on informing the public as a major strategy in advocating for school improvement.

In 1991, with the assistance of the Prichard Committee, the business community created the Partnership for Kentucky Schools, which made a 10-year commitment to promote and support quality education. These two groups are housed together and they coordinate activities and collaborate to support reform efforts.

### How Do They Communicate With and Listen to the Public?

In many cases, activities and programs of the Prichard Committee and the Partnership serve dual purposes—sharing information with the public and soliciting feedback. The following are examples:

- Eight regional coordinators work with local communities and parents to support efforts to improve student achievement; they share information with the public; they also listen to what parents and citizens are saying.
- "Parents and Teachers Talking Together," four-hour structured dialogues focused on expectations for students, are conducted in schools across the state; regional staff train volunteer facilitators and support local hosts who organize these events; in the first three years, more than 5,500 parents and teachers had participated.
- A toll-free telephone line and a resource center make clear and accurate information available to the public; about 1,500 people use this line each year.
- The Partnership identifies and prepares Education Ambassadors, some of Kentucky's most able high school students who promote school reform from a student perspective; with training, some of these students facilitate focus groups of other students.
- A speaker's bureau offers knowledgeable speakers to local groups.
- For four years, a school bus outfitted as a traveling information exhibit on school reform traveled the state, stopping at schools, local fairs and festivals, and special events; more than 250,000 citizens toured the bus.
- Recently, to more fully engage parents in Kentucky's standards-based education system, the Prichard Committee established the Commonwealth Institute for Parent Leadership, along with the Kentucky PTA and the Association of Older Kentuckians. (See page 25 for more information.) Parents with leadership potential are identified with the help of former institute graduates, PTA, family resource centers, schools, and family literacy programs. Each year 200 participants are informed, trained, and offered resources and technical support to get other parents involved in improving student achievement. One specific activity has parents examining student writing, creating a standard for good writing, and learning how they can help their children develop writing skills.
- The Partnership works closely with businesses to evaluate and support the work it does with schools. Activities include sponsoring conversations between business leaders and students; a brown bag lunch series at places of business; encouragement for employers to ask applicants for evidence of academic progress such as test results, portfolio entries, and high school transcripts; and production and distribution of a ***KERA Briefing Notebook; Education: We Make It Our Business: A Planning and Resource Guide;*** and ***Ready for Work: Essential Skills for Kentucky Jobs***.

## How the Prichard Committee (Kentucky) Is Making Things Work (continued)

The Committee and Partnership work closely with state agencies, the state chamber of commerce, and all of the education associations to make maintain good communication and coordinate activities.

### Other Communication Strategies

- **Reaching Higher**, a newspaper insert explaining assessment, was created and 1.3 million copies were distributed.
- Quarter page **ads**, donated to the Partnership, are placed every week in a major newspaper and are used to share information with parents about helping students reach higher levels of achievement.
- A **quarterly newsletter** is published and mailed to 15,000 parents and citizens.
- A **monthly column** is written by staff and distributed to the news media.
- **Guidebooks** on Kentucky school law, finance, and other programs are published and written in language understandable to the public.
- A **glossary of terms** and a description of **parents' rights and responsibilities** have been produced.
- An annual **Kentucky School Updates**, offering information about each segment of the new system as changes have been implemented, has been produced.
- A series of 15-minute **videotapes** designed for use in schools and businesses was produced in collaboration with the Department of Education. It coordinated with a Partnership and Committee guidebook on the primary program.
- **Radio and television ads** have been used to share information.
- An active **relationship with education and editorial writers** in the state's news media is maintained, providing a source of information for those writing about education issues.
- **Materials are distributed** through volunteer members, regional staff, the resource center, family resource centers, media, schools, and PTAs.

### Evaluation Directs Ongoing Work

The Committee and the Partnership adjust their work based on focus groups, research, internal and external evaluations, and feedback from parents and citizens through their ongoing programs.

*For more information, contact Robert F. Sexton, Executive Director, at 606/233-9849 or at admin@prichardcommittee.org.*

## SECTION V:
## Conclusion

The purpose of this Idea Book is to help states think about how to more clearly *inform* parents about state-level improvements in testing and the underlying academic expectations, and to more clearly—and meaningfully—*report* the results of those tests to parents. The examples in **Sections II** and **III** have been provided as guidance to implementing the recommendations in your state. The descriptions in **Section IV** offer you a glimpse of how some organizations are making it work.

This document will hopefully provoke you to look carefully at your communication documents and determine where they can be improved. Does your state provide parents with lists of what all students should know and be able to do, as well as places to go to get more information? Does your state offer parents sample test items, student responses (both good and not-so-good), and explanations of the scoring? Do your reports explain what it means to "meet the standard"? If not, the examples in this Idea Book will help you make those improvements. And as you begin to move forward, keep the following suggestions in mind:

- **Listen to the parents in your community.**
  Whether you use polls, focus groups, surveys, or face-to-face communication, getting to know the parents in your state and community is the only way to be sure that their wants are well represented. View this as an opportunity to engage parents in their own child's education. Recognize, however, that there are different audiences among the group called "parents." "Informed" parents may tolerate more information than would the "regular" parent.

- **Use clear and concrete language.**
  Whether explaining why the state is moving toward higher standards and developing new tests, or answering parent's more commonly asked questions, using language that parents can understand will help to build awareness and support for your improvement efforts.

- **Take the time to plan.**
  Once you have listened to parents, regroup and plan accordingly. Ask yourself, How best can we respond to these suggestions?

- **Ensure a consistent message.**
  Research shows that parents are more apt to look to teachers for information about education issues than to any other source. For that reason, teachers need to be provided with good information on the changes that are taking place and how these changes affect the classroom. They need to understand that the assessment is part of an aligned education system—not a random or discrete act.

- **Coordinate with others.**
  Whether you are listening to your audience, creating documents, or disseminating information, recognize that state departments of education cannot perform these functions alone. Others have a stake in building awareness and understanding of the improvement efforts as well. In many of the examples cited in **Section IV**, there is a high degree of business involvement. Business can help deliver a strong message to the public that students need different and better academic skills to succeed in the workplace than they did a generation ago. They can also provide critical staying power if initial results of the new assessments are disappointing.

- **Realize that improving your communication efforts will take resources.**
  While states should not promise parents more than their budgets or technology can deliver, setting aside the resources to describe the need for higher standards and the results of the assessments should be a priority.

- **Recognize that moving toward a standards-based system takes political will.**
  Education improvement does not happen in a vacuum. It takes leadership, and this leadership needs to come from more than one person.

**Endnotes**

[1] Gandal, Matt. (1997). *Making standards matter: An annual fifty-state report on efforts to raise academic standards*. Washington, DC: American Federation of Teachers.

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] Roeber, E., Bond, L., and Connealy, S. (1997). *Annual survey of state student assessment programs*. Washington, DC: Council of Chief State School Officers.

[4] Immerwahr, J., and Johnson, J. (1996). *Americans' views on standards*. New York, NY: Public Agenda.

[5] *Ibid.*

[6] Public Agenda (1998). *Reality check*. New York, NY: Public Agenda.

[7] Education Commission of the States. (1996). *Listen, discuss and act: Parents' and teachers' views on education reform*. Denver, CO: Education Commission of the States.

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] Olsen, L. A new accountability player: The local newspaper. *Education Week*. June 17, 1998, pg. 1, Volume XVII, Number 40.

[10] Education Commission of the States. (1996). *Listen, discuss and act: Parents' and teachers' views on education reform*. Denver, CO: Education Commission of the States.

# APPENDIX A:
## Annotated Score Reports

During the summer of 1998, the National Education Goals Panel conducted a focus group meeting with parents. The 11 participants represented parents from across the country and were recruited from lists provided by the National PTA and the National Coalition of Title I/Chapter 1 Parents.

The goal of the group was to assess what parents believed to be important elements in the "informing and reporting" communication pieces produced by states to provide information about their children's performance on state tests and the underlying standards.

Part A of the focus group meeting asked participants to pretend that they were a parent from an average school district and that they always believed that their district was typical when it came to education tests—some of the district's children did well on the tests, others did not do well, and some fell in the middle.

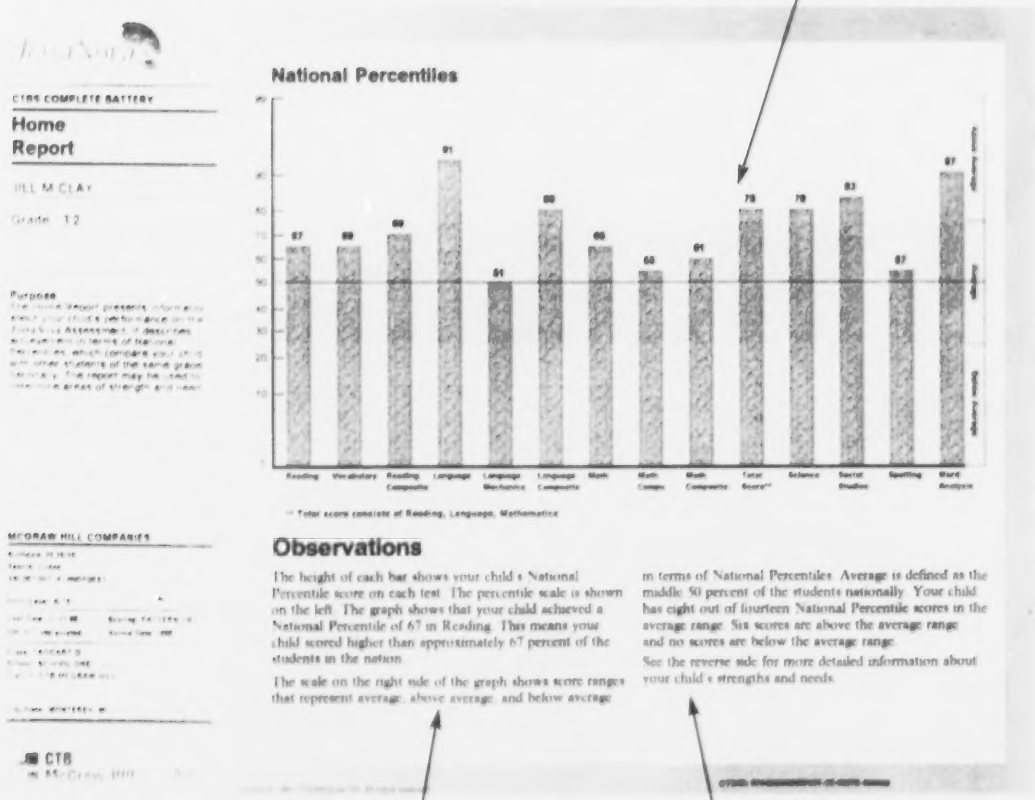
The scenario continued by asking parents to pretend that they had recently received a letter explaining that the state had begun the process of choosing new tests aligned with the state's higher standards, and for this first year, a new mathematics tests would be used with the students in their child's grade this coming fall. The letter called the test a "performance test" but did not explain what was meant by the term. Parents were then asked what they would want to know about the new state test.

Part B of the focus group meeting then asked parents to imagine that they just received a report from the state with their child's test scores. To facilitate this part of the discussion, parents were provided with a set of sample score reports from the following publishers: CTB/McGraw-Hill (Terra Nova Home Report and Terra Nova Performance Level Report), Harcourt Brace (Stanford 9 Home Report and Stanford 9 Student Report with Performance Standards), the National Center on Education and the Economy and the University of Pittsburgh (New Standards Performance Report), and Riverside (Iowa Tests of Basic Skills Profile Narrative Report). The parents were asked what they liked and disliked about these reports. In addition, the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills National Performance Standards Report is included. Although parents did not see this report during the focus group, it is included for the reader's information.

Comments on these reports are provided on the following pages.

# CTB/McGraw-Hill
# Terra Nova Home Report
# (front)

Shading made the chart easier to understand.



CTBS COMPLETE BATTERY

**Home Report**

JILL M CLAY

Grade 12

Purpose

MCGRAW-HILL COcompanies

CTB

**National Percentiles**

Total score consists of Reading, Language, Mathematics

**Observations**

The height of each bar shows your child's National Percentile score on each test. The percentile scale is shown on the left. The graph shows that your child achieved a National Percentile of 67 in Reading. This means your child scored higher than approximately 67 percent of the students in the nation.

The scale on the right side of the graph shows score ranges that represent average, above average, and below average in terms of National Percentiles. Average is defined as the middle 50 percent of the students nationally. Your child has eight out of fourteen National Percentile scores in the average range. Six scores are above the average range and no scores are below the average range.

See the reverse side for more detailed information about your child's strengths and needs.

Parents liked explanations of what the scores mean.

Most text was large enough to read without strain.

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# CTB/McGraw-Hill
# Terra Nova Home Report
# (back)

TerraNova

CTBS COMPLETE BATTERY

**Home Report**

JILL M CLAY

Grade: 3 2

**Purpose:**
This page of the Home Report presents information about your child's areas of strength and need. This information is provided to help you monitor your child's academic growth.

Parents appreciated the "personalized feel" of the report.

MCGRAW HILL COMPANIES

Birthdate: 05/30/90
Special Codes:
HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT

Form/Level: A-10

Test Date: 11/11/98 Scoring: PATTERN (JRT)
ONE ST: Alternative Norms Date: 1998

Class: TAGGART D
School: SCHOOL ONE
District: CTB MCGRAW HILL

City/State: MONTEREY, IN

CTB McGraw-Hill Page 2

## Strengths

**Reading**
- Evaluate/Extend Meaning
- Analyze Text

**Language**
- Editing Skills
- Sentence Structure

**Mathematics**
- Operation Concepts
- Patterns, Functions, Algebra

**Science**
- Life Science
- Earth and Space Science

**Social Studies**
- Civics and Government Perspectives
- Historical and Cultural Perspectives

## Needs

**Reading**
No areas of need were identified for this content area.

**Language**
No areas of need were identified for this content area.

**Mathematics**
- Problem Solving and Reasoning

**Science**
No areas of need were identified for this content area.

**Social Studies**
No areas of need were identified for this content area.

● Mastery ◒ Partial Mastery ○ Non-Mastery

Multiple types of bullets were considered confusing by parents.

Parents would have preferred examples. These comments were "too vague."

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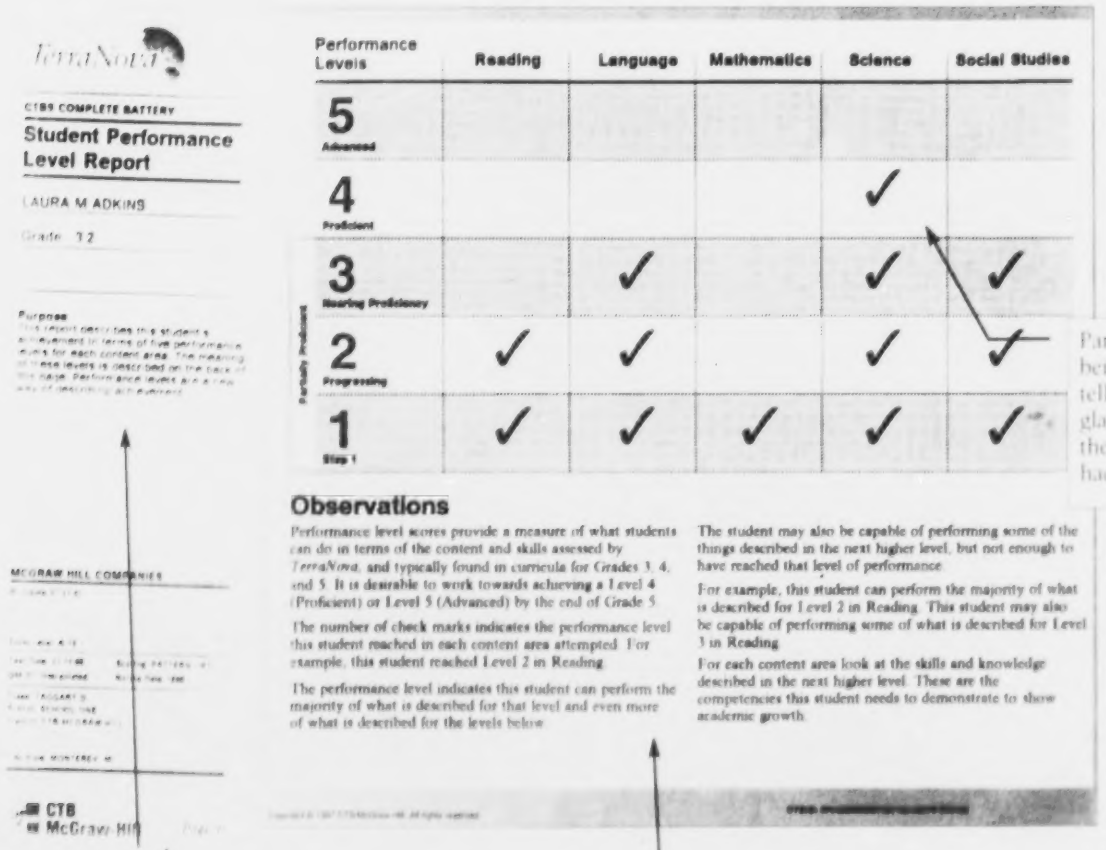
# CTB/McGraw-Hill
# Terra Nova Student Performance Level Report
# (front)



TerraNova

CTBS COMPLETE BATTERY

**Student Performance Level Report**

LAURA M ADKINS

Grade 12

Purpose

| Performance Levels | Reading | Language | Mathematics | Science | Social Studies |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 5 Advanced | | | | | |
| 4 Proficient | | | | ✓ | |
| 3 Nearing Proficiency | | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ |
| 2 Progressing | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ |
| 1 Step 1 | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |

Partially Proficient

## Observations

Performance level scores provide a measure of what students can do in terms of the content and skills assessed by *TerraNova*, and typically found in curricula for Grades 3, 4, and 5. It is desirable to work towards achieving a Level 4 (Proficient) or Level 5 (Advanced) by the end of Grade 5.

The number of check marks indicates the performance level this student reached in each content area attempted. For example, this student reached Level 2 in Reading.

The performance level indicates this student can perform the majority of what is described for that level and even more of what is described for the levels below.

The student may also be capable of performing some of the things described in the next higher level, but not enough to have reached that level of performance.

For example, this student can perform the majority of what is described for Level 2 in Reading. This student may also be capable of performing some of what is described for Level 3 in Reading.

For each content area look at the skills and knowledge described in the next higher level. These are the competencies this student needs to demonstrate to show academic growth.

MCGRAW-HILL COMPANIES

CTB McGraw-Hill

Parents liked being able to tell at a glance how their child had done

Parents preferred "personalized" reports

Text was easy to read

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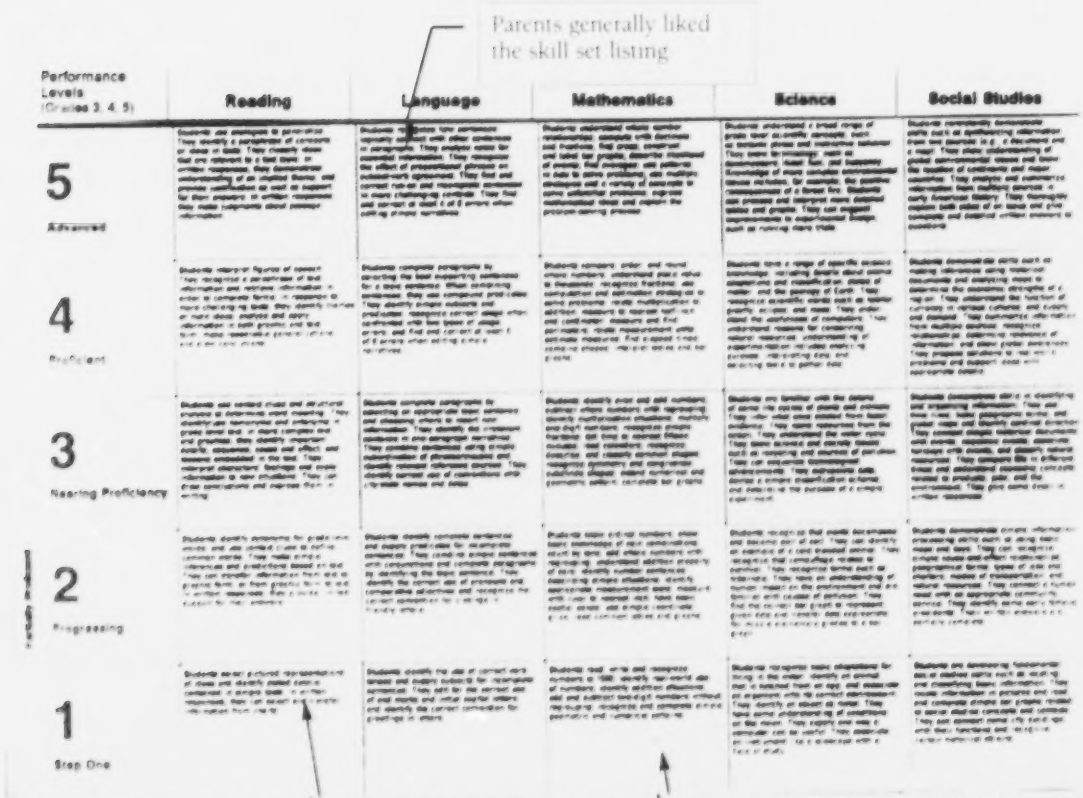
# CTB/McGraw-Hill
# Terra Nova Performance Level Report
# (back)


Parents generally liked the skill set listing
Performance Levels (Grades 3, 4, 5)
Reading
Language
Mathematics
Science
Social Studies
5
Advanced
4
Proficient
3
Nearing Proficiency
2
Progressing
1
Step One
IMPORTANT: Each performance level depicted on the other side indicates the student can perform the majority of what is described for that level and more of what is described for the levels below. The student may also be capable of performing some of the things described in the next higher level, but not enough to have reached that level.
The type was considered too small to read without straining their eyes
Many parents believed descriptions were too technical

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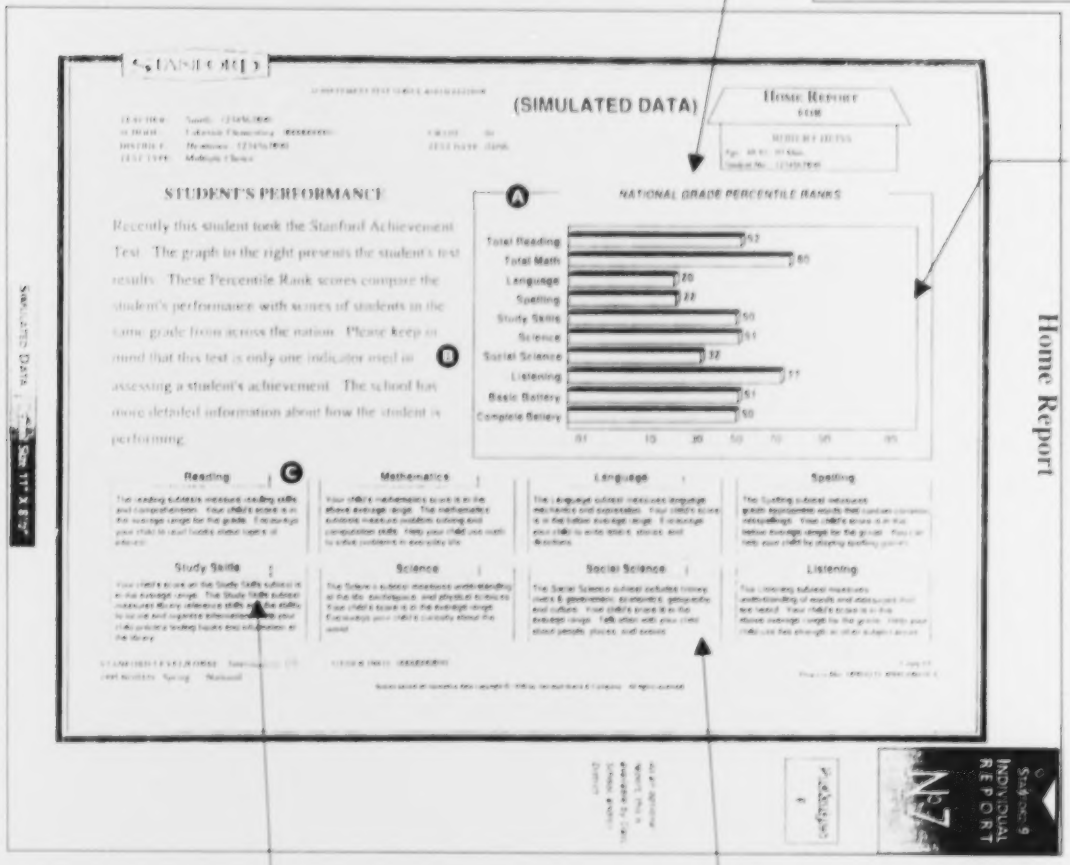
# Harcourt Brace
# Stanford 9 Home Report

The term "percentile" was problematic for many parents because they confused it with the term "percentage."


(SIMULATED DATA)
HOME REPORT
STUDENT'S PERFORMANCE
Recently this student took the Stanford Achievement Test. The graph to the right presents the student's test results. These Percentile Rank scores compare the student's performance with scores of students in the same grade from across the nation. Please keep in mind that this test is only one indicator used in assessing a student's achievement. The school has more detailed information about how the student is performing.
A
NATIONAL GRADE PERCENTILE RANKS
Total Reading 62
Total Math 80
Language 20
Spelling 22
Study Skills 50
Science 51
Social Science 32
Listening 77
Basic Battery 51
Complete Battery 50
B
C
Reading
Mathematics
Language
Spelling
Study Skills
Science
Social Science
Listening
Home Report
INDIVIDUAL REPORT

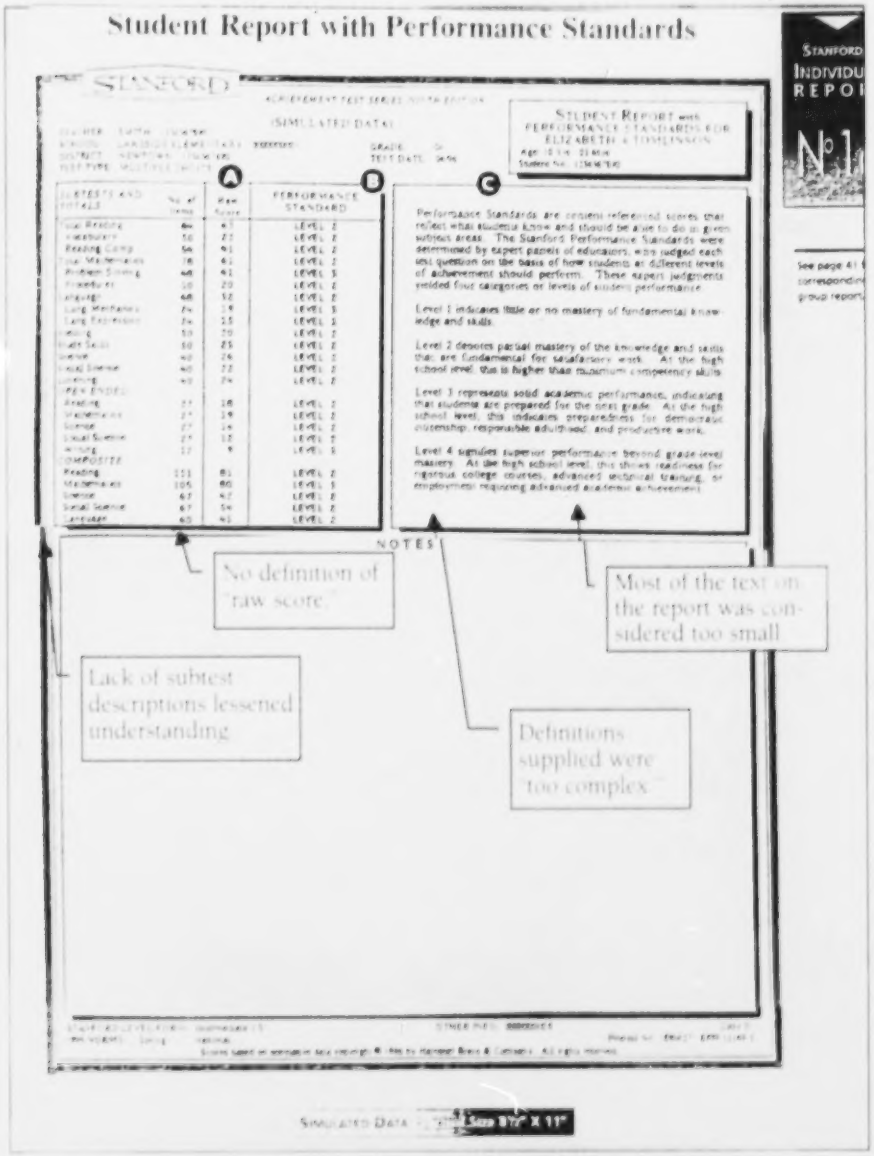
Parents liked the horizontal bars.

Parents liked subtest area descriptions and appreciated learning what could be done to improve a student's score.

A number of parents thought the text was too small to read without straining their eyes.

*Stanford Achievement Test, Ninth Edition. Copyright © 1997 by Harcourt Brace & Company. Reproduced by permission. All rights reserved.*

# Harcourt Brace
## Stanford 9 Student Report with Performance Standards


Student Report with Performance Standards
STANFORD
(SIMULATED DATA)
STUDENT REPORT with PERFORMANCE STANDARDS FOR ELIZABETH A TOMLINSON
A
B
C
SUBTESTS AND TOTALS
No. of Items
Raw Score
PERFORMANCE STANDARD
Performance Standards are content-referenced scores that reflect what students know and should be able to do in given subject areas. The Stanford Performance Standards were determined by expert panels of educators, who judged each test question on the basis of how students at different levels of achievement should perform. These expert judgments yielded four categories or levels of student performance.
Level 1 indicates little or no mastery of fundamental knowledge and skills.
Level 2 denotes partial mastery of the knowledge and skills that are fundamental for satisfactory work. At the high school level, this is higher than minimum competency skills.
Level 3 represents solid academic performance, indicating that students are prepared for the next grade. At the high school level, this indicates preparedness for democratic citizenship, responsible adulthood, and productive work.
Level 4 signifies superior performance beyond grade-level mastery. At the high school level, this shows readiness for rigorous college courses, advanced technical training, or employment requiring advanced academic achievement.
NOTES
No definition of "raw score."
Most of the text on the report was considered too small.
Lack of subtest descriptions lessened understanding.
Definitions supplied were "too complex."
SIMULATED DATA
Size 8½" X 11"

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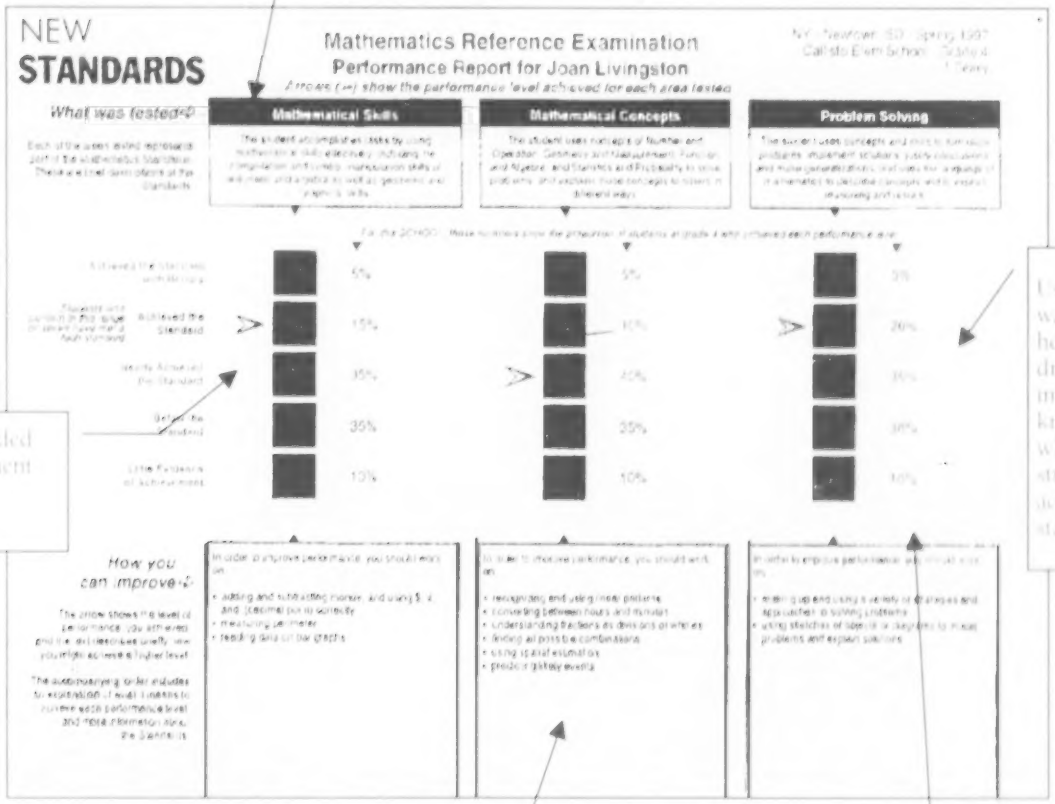
## National Center on Education and the Economy and the University of Pittsburgh
## New Standards Performance Report


Parents liked descriptions of what skill areas were being assessed
NEW STANDARDS
Mathematics Reference Examination
Performance Report for Joan Livingston
What was tested?
Mathematical Skills
Mathematical Concepts
Problem Solving
How you can improve
Arrows provided a clear statement of the child's performance
Use of shading was considered helpful to draw eye to immediately knowing whether the student achieved the standard
Suggestions for improving performance were considered helpful
Percentages from student's school provided context

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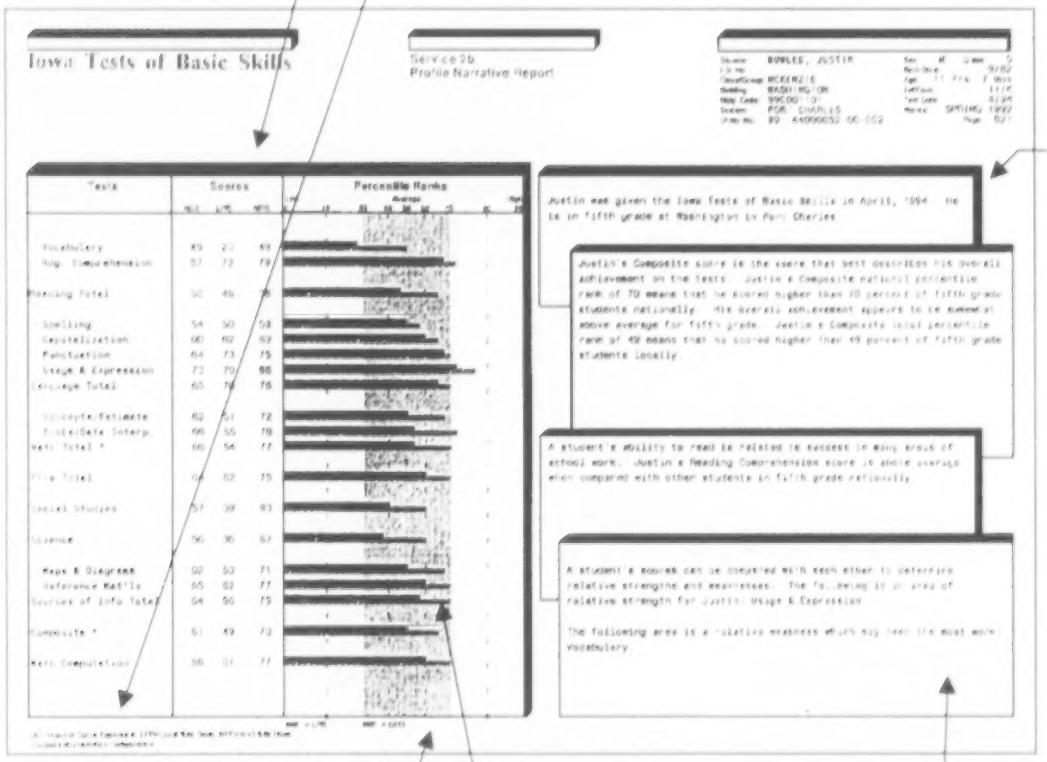
# Riverside
## Iowa Tests of Basic Skills Profile Narrative Report

Parents did not like the use of acronyms and strongly believed that more explanation was needed beyond merely "spelling out" the acronym.


Iowa Tests of Basic Skills
Service 2b
Profile Narrative Report
Tests
Scores
Percentile Ranks
Vocabulary
Reading Comprehension
Spelling
Capitalization
Punctuation
Usage & Expression
Language Total
Maps & Diagrams
Reference Materials
Sources of Info Total
Composite *
Math Computation
Justin was given the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills in April, 1994. He is in fifth grade at Washington in Fort Charles.
Justin's Composite score is the score that best describes his overall achievement on the tests. Justin's Composite national percentile rank of 70 means that he scored higher than 70 percent of fifth grade students nationally. His overall achievement appears to be somewhat above average for fifth grade. Justin's Composite local percentile rank of 49 means that he scored higher than 49 percent of fifth grade students locally.
A student's ability to read is related to success in many areas of school work. Justin's Reading Comprehension score is about average when compared with other students in fifth grade nationally.
A student's scores can be compared with each other to determine relative strengths and weaknesses. The following is an area of relative strength for Justin: Usage & Expression.
The following area is a relative weakness which may need the most work: Vocabulary.

Parents liked the fact that the report was personalized.

Shading behind the bar chart made it easier to read.

Because the natural flow of reading is from left to right, parents felt comfortable with the horizontal bars.

Parents didn't understand what they should do next after reviewing the results.

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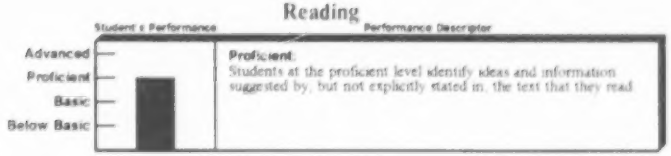
# Riverside
## Iowa Tests of Basic Skills National Performance Standards Report

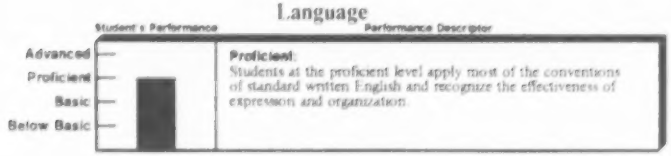
**Iowa Tests of Basic Skills**

National Performance Standards Report
Service 34
Student: EDWARDS, LAURIE

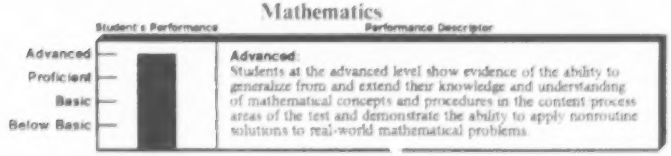
### Reading



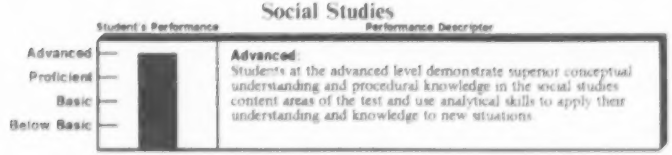

### Language


Student's Performance
Performance Descriptor
Advanced
Proficient
Basic
Below Basic
Proficient:
Students at the proficient level apply most of the conventions of standard written English and recognize the effectiveness of expression and organization.

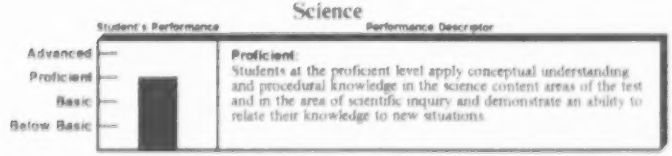
### Mathematics


Student's Performance
Performance Descriptor
Advanced
Proficient
Basic
Below Basic
Advanced:
Students at the advanced level show evidence of the ability to generalize from and extend their knowledge and understanding of mathematical concepts and procedures in the content process areas of the test and demonstrate the ability to apply nonroutine solutions to real-world mathematical problems.

### Social Studies


Student's Performance
Performance Descriptor
Advanced
Proficient
Basic
Below Basic
Advanced:
Students at the advanced level demonstrate superior conceptual understanding and procedural knowledge in the social studies content areas of the test and use analytical skills to apply their understanding and knowledge to new situations.

### Science


Student's Performance
Performance Descriptor
Advanced
Proficient
Basic
Below Basic
Proficient:
Students at the proficient level apply conceptual understanding and procedural knowledge in the science content areas of the test and in the area of scientific inquiry and demonstrate an ability to relate their knowledge to new situations.

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## APPENDIX B:
## Resources

1) *Building Community Support for Schools: A Practical Guide to Strategic Communications*, A-Plus Communications and Education Commission of the States

   - To request a copy, call 303/299-3692 or visit their web site at www.ecs.org.

2) *Building Support for Tests That Count: A Business Leader's Guide*, The Business Roundtable

   - To request a copy, fax 202/466-3509 or visit their web site at www.brtable.org.

3) *Checkpoints for Progress for Families and Communities*, U.S. Department of Education

   - To request a copy, call 800/USA-LEARN or visit their web site at www.ed.gov/inits/americareads. Copies are free of charge.

4) *Compact for Learning: An Action Handbook for Family-School-Community Partnerships*, U.S. Department of Education

   - To request a copy, call 800/USA-LEARN or visit their web site at www.ed.gov/pubs/Compact. Copies are free of charge.

5) *Do-it-Yourself Focus Groups: A Low-Cost Way to Listen to Your Community*, Education Commission of the States

   - To request a copy, call 303/299-3692 or visit their web site at www.ecs.org.



6) *National Standards for Parent/Family Involvement Programs*, National PTA

   - To request a copy, call 800/307-4PTA or visit their web site at www.pta.org.

7) *Standards Mean Business Leadership Kit*, National Alliance of Business

   - To request a copy, call 800/787-7788 or visit their web site at www.nab.com or www.bcer.org.

8) *Strengthening Your Child's Academic Future*, Education Excellence Partnership

   - To request a copy, call 800/USA-LEARN or fax 202/466-3509. Also available at the Education Excellence Partnership web site at www.edex.org, the U.S. Department of Education web site at www.ed.gov, and the National Alliance of Business web site at www.nab.com.

9) *Successful Strategies Booklet Series* [highlighting the business role in a variety of education topics], National Alliance of Business

   - To request a copy, call 800/787-7788 or visit their web site at www.nab.com or www.bcer.org.

10) *Working with the News Media*, American Association of School Administrators

   - To request a copy, call 888/782-2272 or 301/617-7802, or visit their web site at www.aasa.org.

## APPENDIX C:

## Acknowledgments

*Talking About Tests, An Idea Book for State Leaders*, was designed and written by Leslie Lawrence. Special thanks are due to members of the National Education Goals Panel's Advisory Group on Reporting Assessment Results to Parents, especially the co-chairs, David Ice and Andrew Romanoff, and those who contributed to the Close-ups and descriptions in Section IV: Linda Bond, Cindy Heine, Latha Krishnaiyer, Ron Peiffer, Bill Porter, Billie Sherrod, John Tanner, Linda Gleckler, Sylvia Soholt, and Monica Solomon. Thanks are also due to Linda Neri for her contribution to Section IV, and Michelle Tobias for her contribution to the Close-ups. Mary Lou Coffman, Charles Dibble, Katie Gerringer, Armen Kojoyian, and Peter Morrison of EEI Communications contributed expertise in graphic design, layout, report production, and editorial support. Babette Gutmann and Cathy Lease of Westat provided meeting and research support. Many thanks are due to John Barth, Christopher Harrington, and Emily Wurtz at the National Education Goals Panel. The Panel wishes to acknowledge the states for their assistance in its data collection efforts and participants in its focus groups who reviewed earlier versions of this document.



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Andrew Romanoff, Office of the Governor, Colorado

**Members**

Julie Bell, National Conference of State Legislatures
Linda Bond, CTB/McGraw-Hill
Adriana de Kanter, U.S. Department of Education
Janet Durfee-Hidalgo, Ohio Department of Education
Gale Gaines, Southern Regional Education Board
Matt Gandal, Achieve
Aimee Guidera, National Alliance of Business
Cindy Heine, The Prichard Committee
Craig Jerald, *Education Week*
Barb Kapinus, Westat
Latha Krishnaiyer, Florida PTA
Dane Linn, National Governors' Association
Maggie McNeely, U.S. Department of Education
Ron Peiffer, Maryland State Department of Education
Andy Plattner, A-Plus Communications
Bill Porter, Partnership for Learning
Billie Sherrod, Georgia Department of Education
John Tanner, Delaware Department of Education

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Sylvia Soholt, Edmonds School District, Washington
Monica Solomon, Cincinnati Public Schools, Ohio

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